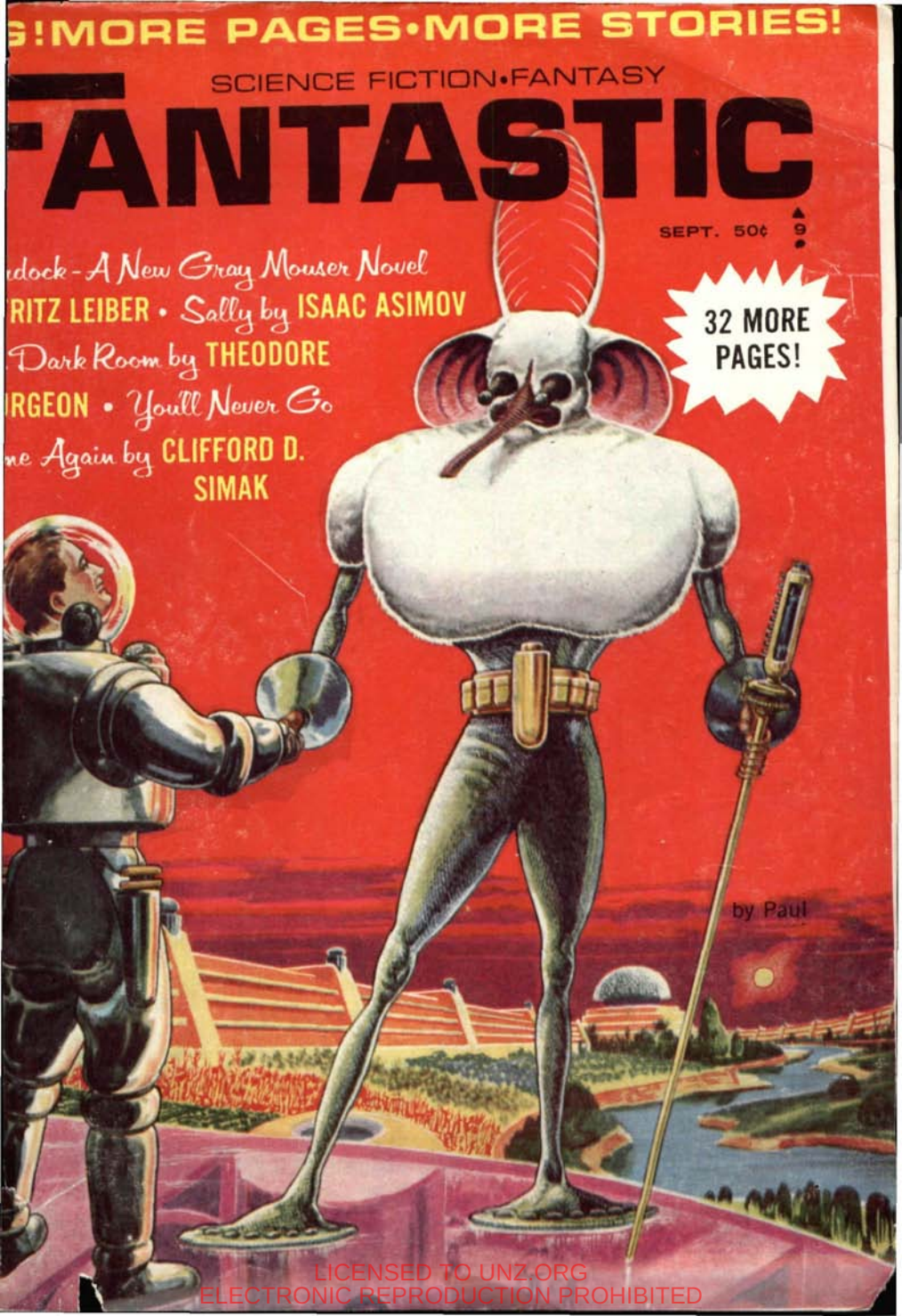

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FANTASTIC

September, 1965 Vol. 15, No. 1

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EDITORIAL | From the Publisher

IF YOU'VE looked closely at our front cover, "The Man from Mars," you probably noticed that it was done by the late but still incomparable Frank R. Paul, the greatest science-fiction artist this field has produced. For sheer artistic skill, for technical accuracy, for unfailing originality (he proudly declared that he had never drawn the same spaceship twice—and he hadn't), who can match him? And to do justice to his talent, we have spared no expense. His magnificent puff-chested gentleman from Mars stares out at you with all the brilliant color and fine detail of the original painting because it has been printed by offset, a relatively new process never before used on *Fantastic* covers but from now on a standard feature.

You may also have noticed that this issue is much thicker than the last *Fantastic* you held (by 32 extra pages to be exact). If—like most readers—you leafed through it first thing, you probably also welcomed the return of interior illustrations (eight pages of them), more than you've seen in *Fantastic* for a long while.

But artwork and extra pages aside, it's the stories that count, and there we've put everything into bringing you first-rate yarns by some of the most popular writers in the field. For a starter we recommend Fritz Leiber's brilliant novel "Stardock," a brand-new Gray Mouser story, and a beauty too. For some vintage S-F, try David H. Keller's "The Worm," a classic that still gives us a chill every time we reread it. Then there's the Simak story, another of those quiet nightmares he does so well. Although nothing seems to happen—at first—eventually *everything* does. As for the Sturgeon, well, which of us isn't dazzled by his virtuosity?—nowhere better displayed than in "The Dark Room," as exasperating yet compelling as anything he has ever done. Lastly, a gem by Isaac Asimov. "Sally," one of his own personal favorites, by the way, has long been one of ours. From now on we think she will be one of yours too.

That's about it for this time, but now it's your turn. So why not drop us a line? We welcome your comments and suggestions—because over the years *Fantastic* has grown out of *your* taste for the best in science fiction and fantasy, and we intend to keep it that way.

Sol Cohen
PUBLISHER

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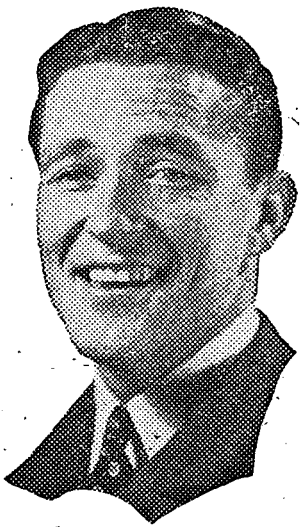
Do You Laugh Your Greatest Powers Away?



THOSE STRANGE INNER URGES

You have heard the phrase; "Laugh, clown, laugh." Well, that fits me perfectly. I'd fret, worry and try to reason my way out of difficulties—all to no avail; then I'd have a hunch, a something within that would tell me to do a certain thing. I'd laugh it off with a shrug. I knew too much, I thought, to heed these impressions. Well, it's different now—I've learned to use this inner power and I no longer make the mistakes I did, because I do the right thing at the right time.

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That book opened a new world to me. I advise *you* to write today and ask for your copy. *It will prove to you* what your mind can demonstrate. Don't go through life laughing your mental powers away. Simply write: Scribe B.E.H.

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STARDOCK

By FRITZ LEIBER

An unlikely place for Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser—the man-killing ice slopes and rock cliffs of a fearsome mountain. But nothing is more unlikely than the denizens of the peak: treacherous, disembodied, other-worldly. And nothing more precious than the legendary treasure, the Heart of Light.

Illustrated by MORROW

Complete Short Novel

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EARLY that evening the sky's gray cloud-armor blew away south, smashed and dissolving as if by blows of an acid-dipped mace. The same mighty northeast wind contemptuously puffed down the hitherto impregnable cloud-wall to the east, revealing a grimly majestic mountain range running north to south and springing abruptly from the plateau, two leagues high, of the Cold Waste—like a dragon fifty leagues long heaving up its spike-crested spine from icy entombment.

FAFHRD, no stranger to the Cold Waste, born at the foot of these same mountains and childhood climber of their lower slopes, named them off to the Gray Mouser as the two men stood together on the crunchy hoarfrosted eastern rim of the hollow that held their camp. The sun, set for the camp, still shone from behind their backs onto the western faces of the major peaks as he named them—but it shone not with any romanticizing rosy glow, but rather with a clear, cold detail-pinning light fitting the peaks' dire aloofness.

"Travel your eye to the first great northerly upthrust," he told the Mouser, "that phalanx of heaven-menacing ice-spears shafted with dark rock and gleaming green—that's the Ripsaw. Then, dwarfing them, a single ivory-icy tooth, unscalable by any sane appraisal—the Tusk, he's called. Another unscalable then, still higher and with south wall sheer precipice shooting up a league and curving outward toward the needletop: he is White Fang, where my father died—the canine of the Mountains of the Giants.

"Now begin again with the first snow-dome at the south of the chain," continued the tall fur-cloaked man, copper-bearded and copper-mained, his head otherwise bare to the frigid air, which was as quiet at ground level as sea-deep beneath storm. "The Hint, she's named, or the Come On. Little enough she looks, yet men have frozen nighting on her slopes and been whirled to death by her whimsical queenly avalanches. Then a far vaster snow-dome, true queen to the Hint's princess, a hemisphere of purest white grand enough to roof the council hall of all the gods that ever were or will be—she is Gran Hanack, whom my father was first of men to mount and master. Our town of tents was pitched *there* near her base. No mark of it now, I'll guess, not even a midden.

"After Gran Hanack and nearest to us of them all, a huge flat-topped pillar, a pedestal for the sky almost, looking to be of green-shot snow but in truth all

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snow-pale granite scoured by the storms: Obelisk Polaris.

"Lastly," Fafhrd continued, sinking his voice and gripping his smaller comrade's shoulder, "let your gaze travel up the snow-tressed, dark-rocked, snow-capped peak between the Obelisk and White Fang, her glittering skirt somewhat masked by the former, but taller than they as they are taller than the Waste. Even now she hides behind her the mounting moon. She is Stardock, our quest's goal."

"A pretty enough, tall, slender wart on this frostbit patch of Nehwon's face," the Gray Mouser conceded, writhing his shoulder from Fafhrd's gripe. "And now at last tell me, friend, why you never climbed this Stardock in your youth and seized the treasure there, but must wait until we get a clue to it in a dusty, hot scorpion-patrolled desert tower a quarter world away—and waste half a year getting here."

FAFHRD's voice grew a shade unsure as he answered, "My father never climbed her, how should I? Also, there were no legends of a treasure on Stardock's top in my father's clan . . . though a storm of other legends about Stardock, each forbidding her ascent. They called my father the Legend Breaker and shrugged wisely when he died on White Fang . . . truly, my memory's not so good for those days, Mouser—I got many a mind-shattering knock on my head before I learned to deal all knocks first . . . and then I was hardly a boy when the clan left the Cold Waste—though the rough hard walls of Obelisk Polaris had been my up-ended playground . . . ."

The Mouser nodded doubtfully. In the stillness they heard their tethered ponies munching the ice-crisped grass of the hollow, then a faint unangry growl from Hrissa the ice-cat, curled between the tiny fire and the piled baggage—likely one of the ponies had come cropping too close. On the great icy plain around them, nothing moved—or almost nothing.

The Mouser dipped gray lambskin-gloved fingers into the bottom of his pouch and from the pocket there withdrew a tiny oblong of parchment and read from it, more by memory than sight:

Who mounts white Stardock, the Moon Tree,
Past worm and gnome and unseen bars,
Will win the key to luxury:
The Heart of Light, a pouch of stars.

Fafhrd said dreamily, "They say the gods once dwelt and had their smithies on Stardock and

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from thence, amidst jetting fire and showering sparks, launched all the stars: hence her name. They say diamonds, rubies, smaragds—all great gems—are the tiny pilot models the gods made of the stars . . . and then threw carelessly away across the world when their great work was done."

"You never told me that before," the Mouser said, looking at him sharply.

Fafhrd blinked his eyes and frowned puzzledly. "I am beginning to remember childhood things."

THE Mouser smiled thinly before returning the parchment to its deep pocket. "The guess that a pouch of stars might be a bag of gems," he listed, "the story that Nehwon's biggest diamond is called the Heart of Light, trust in a few words on a ramskin scrap in the topmost room of a desert tower locked and sealed for centuries—small hints, those, to draw two men across this murdering monotonous Cold Waste. Tell me, Old Horse, were you just homesick for the white miserable meadows of your birth to pretend to believe 'em?"

"Those small hints," Fafhrd said, gazing now toward White Fang, "drew other men north across Nehwon. There must have been other ramskin scraps."

"We left all such fellows behind at Illik-Ving, or Lankhmar even, before we ever mounted the Trollsteps," the Mouser asserted with complete confidence. "Weak sisters, they were, smelling loot but quailing at hardship."

Fafhrd gave a small headshake and pointed. Between them and White Fang rose the tiniest thread of black smoke.

"Did Gnarfi and Kranarch seem weak sisters?—to name but two of the other seekers," he asked when the Mouser finally saw and nodded.

"It could be," the Mouser agreed gloomily. "Though aren't there any ordinary travelers of this Waste? Not that we've seen a man-shaped soul since the Mingol."

Fafhrd said thoughtfully, "It might be an encampment of the Ice Gnomes . . . though they seldom leave their caves except at High Summer, now a month passed. . . ." He broke off, frowning puzzledly. "Now how did I know that?"

"Another childhood memory bobbing to the top of the black pot?" the Mouser hazarded. Fafhrd shrugged doubtfully.

"So, for choice, Kranarch and Gnarfi," the Mouser concluded. "Two strong brothers, I'll concede. Perhaps we should have picked a fight with 'em at Illik-Ving," he suggested. "Or perhaps even now . . . a swift

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march by night . . . a sudden swoop—"

Fafhrd shook his head. "Now we're climbers, not killers," he said. "A man must be all climber to dare Stardock." He directed the Mouser's gaze back toward the tallest mountain. "Let's rather study her west wall while the light holds.

"Begin first at her feet," he said. "That glimmering skirt falling from her snowy hips, which are almost as high as the Obelisk—that's the White Waterfall, where no man may live.

"Now to her head again. From her flat tilted snow-cap hang two great swelling braids of snow, streaming almost perpetually with avalanches, as if she combed 'em day and night—the Tresses, those are called. Between them's a wide ladder of dark rock, marked at three points by ledges. The topmost of the three ledge-banks is the Face—d'you note the darker ledges marking eyes and lips? The midmost of the three is called the Roosts; the lowermost—level with Obelisk's wide summit—the Lairs."

"What lairs and roosts there?" the Mouser wanted to know.

"None may say, for none have climbed the Ladder," Fafhrd replied. "Now as to our route up her—it's most simple. We scale Obelisk Polaris—a trustworthy mountain if there ever was one—then cross by a dippling snow-saddle (there's the danger-stretch of our ascent!) to Stardock and climb the Ladder to her top."

"How do we climb the Ladder in the long blank stretches between the ledges?" the Mouser asked with childlike innocence, almost. "That is, if the Lairers and Roosters will honor our passports and permit us to try."

Fafhrd shrugged. "There'll be a way, rock being rock."

"Why's there no snow on the Ladder?"

"Too steep."

"And supposing we climb it to the top," the Mouser finally asked, "how do we lift our black-and-blue skeletonized bodies over the brim of Stardock's snowy hat, which seems to outcurve and downcurve most stylishly?"

"There's a triangular hole in it somewhere called the Needle's Eye," Fafhrd answered negligently. "Or so I've heard. But never you fret, Mouser, we'll find it."

"Of course we will," the Mouser agreed with an airy certainty that almost sounded sincere, "we who hop-skip across shaking snow bridges and dance the fantastic up vertical walls without ever touching hand to granite. Remind me to bring a longish knife to carve our initials on the sky when we celebrate the end of our little upward sortie."

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HIS gaze wandered slightly northward. In another voice he continued, "The dark north wall of Stardock now—that looks steep enough, to be sure, but free of snow to the very top. Why isn't that our route—rock, as you say with such unanswerable profundity, being rock."

Fafhrd laughed unmockingly. "Mouser," he said, "do you mark against the darkening sky that long white streamer waving south from Stardock's top? Yes, and below it a lesser streamer—can you distinguish that? That second one comes through the Needle's Eye! Well, those streamers from Stardock's hat are called the Grand and Petty Pennons. They're powdered snow blasted off Stardock by the northeast gale, which blows seven days at least out of eight, never predictably. That gale would pluck the stoutest climber off the north wall as easily as you or I might puff dandelion down from its darkening stem. While Stardock's self shields the Ladder from the gale."

"Does the gale never shift round to strike the Ladder?" the Mouser inquired lightly.

"Only occasionally," Fafhrd reassured him.

"Oh, that's great," the Mouser responded with quite overpowering sincerity and would have returned to the fire, except just then the darkness began swiftly to climb the Mountains of the Giants, as the sun took his final dive far to the west, and he stayed to watch the grand spectacle.

It was like a black blanket being pulled up. First the glittering skirt of the White Waterfall was hid, then the Lairs on the Ladder and then the Roosts. Now all the other peaks were gone, even the Tusk's and White Fang's gleaming cruel tips, even the greenish-white roof of Obelisk Polaris. Now only Stardock's snow-hat was left and below it the Face between the silvery Tresses. For a moment the ledges called the Eyes gleamed, or seemed to. Then all was night.

YET there was a pale afterglow about. It was profoundly silent and the air utterly unmoving. Around them, the Cold Waste seemed to stretch north, west, and south to infinity.

And in that space of silence something went whisper-gliding through the still air, with the faint rushy sound of a great sail in a moderate breeze. Fafhrd and the Mouser both stared all around wildly. Nothing. Beyond the little fire, Hrissa the ice-cat sprang up hissing. Still nothing. Then the sound, whatever had made it, died away.

Very softly, Fafhrd began, "There is a legend. . . ." A long pause. Then with a sudden headshake, in a more natural voice:

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"The memory slips away, Mouser. All my mind-fingers couldn't clutch it. Let's patrol once around the camp and so to bed."

FROM first sleep the Mouser woke so softly that even Hrissa, back pressed against him from his knees to chest on the side toward the fire, did not rouse.

Emerging from behind Stardock, her light glittering on the southern Tress, hung the swelling moon, truly a proper fruit of the Moon Tree. Strange, the Mouser thought, how small the moon was, and how big Stardock, silhouetted against the moon-pale sky.

Then, just below the flat top of Stardock's hat, he saw a bright, pale blue twinkling. He recalled that Ashsha, pale blue and brightest of Nehwon's stars, was near the moon tonight and he wondered if he were seeing her by rare chance through the Needle's eye, proving the latter's existence. He wondered too what great sapphire or blue diamond —perhaps the Heart of Light?— had been the gods' pilot model for Ashsha, smiling drowsily the while at himself for entertaining such a silly, lovely myth. And then, embracing the myth entire, he asked himself whether the gods had left any of their full-scale stars, unlaunched, on Stardock. Then Ashsha, if it were she, winked out.

The Mouser felt cozy in his cloak lined with sheep's-wool and now thong-laced into a bag by the horn hooks around its hem. He stared long and dreamily at Stardock until the moon broke loose from her and a blue jewel twinkled on top of her hat and broke loose too—now Ashsha surely. He wondered unfearfully about the windy rushing he and Fafhrd had heard in the still air —perhaps only a long tongue of the storm licking down briefly. If the storm lasted, they would climb up into it.

Hrissa stretched in her sleep. Fafhrd grumbled low in a dream, wrapped in his own great thong-laced cloak stuffed with eider-down.

The Mouser dropped his gaze to the ghostly flames of the dying fire, seeking sleep himself. The flames made girl-bodies, then girl-faces. Next a ghostly pale green girl-face—perhaps an afterimage, he thought at first—appeared beyond the fire, staring at him through close-slitted eyes across the flame tops. It grew more distinct as he gazed at it, but there was no trace of hair or body about it—it hung against the dark like a mask.

YET it was weirdly beautiful: narrow chin, high-arched cheeks, wine-dark short lips slightly pouted, straight nose that went up without a dip into

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the broad, somewhat low forehead—and then the mystery of those fully lidded eyes seeming to peer at him through wine-dark lashes. And all, save lashes and lips, of palest green, like jade.

The Mouser did not speak or stir a muscle, simply because the face was very beautiful to him—just as any man might hope for the moment never to end when his naked mistress unconsciously or by secret design assumes a particularly charming attitude.

Also, in the dismal Cold Waste, any man treasures illusions, though knowing them almost certainly to be such.

Suddenly the eyes parted wide, showing only the darkness behind, as if the face were a mask indeed. The Mouser did start then, but still not enough to wake Hrissa.

Then the eyes closed, the lips puckered with taunting invitingness; then the face began swiftly to dissolve as if it were being literally wiped away. First the right side went, then the left, then the center, last of all the dark lips and the eyes. For a moment the Mouser fancied he caught a winey odor; then all was gone.

He contemplated waking Fafhrd and almost laughed at thought of his comrade's surly reactions. He wondered if the face had been a sign from the gods, or a sending from some black magician castled on Stardock, or Stardock's very soul perhaps—though then where had she left her glittering Tresses and hat and her Ashsha eye?—or only a random creation of his own most clever brain, stimulated by sexual privation and tonight by beauteous if devilish dangerous mountains. Rather quickly he decided on the last explanation and he slumbered.

TWO evenings later, at the same hour, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser stood scarce a knife-cast from the west wall of Obelisk Polaris, building a cairn from pale greenish rock-shards fallen from him over the millennia. Among this scanty scree were some bones, many broken, of sheep or goats.

As before, the air was still though very cold, the Waste empty, the set sun bright on the mountain faces.

From this closest vantage point the Obelisk was foreshortened into a pyramid that seemed to taper up forever, almost vertically. Encouragingly, his rock felt diamond-hard, while the lowest reaches of the wall at any rate were thick with bumpy handholds and footholds, like pebbled leather.

To the south, Gran Hanack and the Hint were hid. To the north White Fang towered mon-

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strously, yellowish white in the sunlight, as if ready to rip a hole in the graying sky. Bane of Fafhrd's father, the Mouser recalled.

Of Stardock, there could be seen the dark beginning of the wind-blasted north wall and the north end of the deadly pallid cascade of the White Waterfall. All else of Stardock the Obelisk hid.

Save for one touch: almost straight overhead, seeming now to come from Obelisk Polaris, the ghostly Grand Pennon streamed southwest.

From behind Fafhrd and the Mouser as they worked came the tantalizing odor of two snow-hares roasting by the fire, while before it Hrissa tore flesh slowly and savoringly from the carcass of a third she'd coursed down. The ice-cat was about the size and shape of a cheetah, though with long tufty white hair. The Mouser had bought her from a far-ranging Mingol trapper just north of the Trollsteps.

Beyond the fire the ponies eagerly chomped the last of the grain, strengthening stuff they'd not tasted for a week.

Fafhrd wrapped his sheathed longsword Graywand in oiled silk and laid it in the cairn, then held out a big hand to the Mouser.

"Scalpel?"

"I'm taking my sword with me," the Mouser stated, then added justifyingly, "It's but a feather to yours."

"Tomorrow you'll find what a feather weighs," Fafhrd foretold. The big man shrugged and placed by Graywand his helmet, a bear's hide, a folded tent, shovel and pickaxe, gold bracelets from his wrists and arms, quills, ink, papyrus, a large copper pot, and some books and scrolls. The Mouser added various empty and near-empty bags, two hunting spears, skis, an unstrung bow with a quiver of arrows, tiny jars of oily paint and squares of parchment, and all the harness of the ponies, many of the items wrapped against damp like Graywand.

Then, their appetites quickening from the roast-fumes, the two comrades swiftly built two top courses, roofing the cairn.

JUST as they turned toward supper, facing the gilt-edged flat western horizon, they heard in the silence the rushy sail-like noise again, fainter this time but twice: once in the air to the north and, almost simultaneously, to the south.

Again they stared around swiftly but searchingly, yet there was nothing anywhere to be seen except—again Fafhrd saw it first—a thread of black smoke very near White Fang, rising from a point on the glacier

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between that mountain and Stardock.

"Gnarfi and Kranarch, if it be they, have chosen the rocky north wall for their ascent," the Mouser observed.

"And it will be their bane," Fafhrd predicted, up-jerking his thumb at the Pennon.

The Mouser nodded with less certainty, then demanded, "Fafhrd, what *was* that sound? You've lived here."

Fafhrd's brow crinkled and his eyes almost shut. "Some legend of great birds . . .," he muttered questioningly, ". . . or of great fishes—no, that couldn't be right."

"Memory pot still seething all black?" the Mouser asked. Fafhrd nodded.

Before he left the cairn, the Northerner laid beside it a slab of salt. "That," he said, "along with the ice-filmed pool and herbage we just passed, should hold the ponies here for a week. If we don't return, well, at least we showed 'em the way between here and Illik-Ving."

Hrissa smiled up from her bloody tidbit, as if to say, "No need to worry about me or my rations."

AGAIN the Mouser woke as soon as sleep had gripped him tight, this time with a surge of pleasure, as one who remembers a rendezvous. And again, this time without any preliminary star-staring or flame-gazing, the living mask faced him across the sinking fire: every same expression-quirk and feature—short lips, nose and forehead one straight line—except that tonight it was ivory pale with greenish lips and lids and lashes.

The Mouser was considerably startled, for last night he had stayed awake waiting for the phantom girl-face—and even trying to make it come again—until the swelling moon had risen three hand's-breadths above Stardock . . . without any success whatever. His mind had known that it had been on the first occasion an hallucination, but his feelings had insisted otherwise—to his considerable disgust and the loss of a quarter night's sleep.

And by day he had secretly consulted the last of the four short stanzas on the parchment scrap in his pouch's deepest pocket:

Who scales the Snow King's
citadel
Shall father his two
daughters' sons;
Though he must face foes
fierce and fell,
His seed shall live while
time still runs.

Yesterday that had seemed rather promising—at least the fathering and daughters part—

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though today, after his lost sleep, the merest mockery.

But now the living mask was there again and going through all the same teasing antics, including the shuddersome yet somehow thrilling trick of opening wide its lids to show not eyes but a dark backing like the rest of the night. The Mouser was enchanted in a shivery way, but unlike the first night he was full-mindedly alert and he tested for illusions by blinking and squinting his own eyes and silently shifting his head about in his hood—with no effect whatever on the living mask. Then he quietly unlaced the thong from the top hooks of his cloak—Hrissa was sleeping against Fafhrd tonight—and slowly reached out his hand and picked up a pebble and flicked it across the pale flames at a point somewhat below the mask.

Although he knew there wasn't anything beyond the fire but scattered scree and ringingly hard earth, there wasn't the faintest sound of the pebble striking anywhere. He might have thrown it off Nehwon.

At almost the same instant, the mask smiled tauntingly.

The Mouser was very swiftly out of his cloak and on his feet.

But even more swiftly the mask dissolved away—this time in one swift stroke from forehead to chin.

He quickly stepped, almost lunged, around the fire to the spot where the mask had seemed to hang, and there he stared around searchingly. Nothing—except a fleeting breath of wine or spirits of wine. He stirred the fire and stared around again. Still nothing. Except that Hrissa woke beside Fafhrd and bristled her mustache and gazed solemnly, perhaps scornfully, at the Mouser, who was beginning to feel rather a fool. He wondered if his mind and his desires were playing a silly game against each other.

Then he trod on something. His pebble, he thought, but when he picked it up, he saw it was a tiny jar. It could have been one of his own pigment jars, but it was too small, hardly bigger than a joint of his thumb, and made not of hollowed stone but some kind of ivory or other tooth.

HE knelt by the fire and peered into it, then dipped in his little finger and gingerly rubbed the tip against the rather hard grease inside. It came out ivory-hued. The grease had an oily, not winey odor.

The Mouser pondered by the fire for some time. Then with a glance at Hrissa, who had closed her eyes and laid back her mustache again, and at Fafhrd, who was snoring softly, he returned to his cloak and to sleep.

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He had not told Fafhrd a word about his earlier vision of the living mask. His surface reason was that Fafhrd would laugh at such calf-brained nonsense of smoke-faces, his deeper reason the one which keeps any man from mentioning a new pretty girl even to his dearest friend.

So perhaps it was the same reason which next morning kept Fafhrd from telling his dearest friend what happened to him late that same night. Fafhrd dreamed he was feeling out the exact shape of a girl's face in absolute dark while her slender hands caressed his body. She had a rounded forehead, very long-lashed eyes, in-dipping nose bridge, apple cheeks, an impudent snub nose—it *felt* impudent!—and long lips whose grin his big gentle fingers could trace clearly.

HE woke to the moon glaring down at him aslant from the south. It silvered the Obelisk's interminable wall, turning rock knobs to black shadow bars. He also woke to acute disappointment that a dream had been only a dream. Then he would have sworn that he felt fingertips briefly brush his face and that he heard a faint silvery chuckle which receded swiftly. He sat up like a mummy in his laced cloak and stared around. The fire had sunk to a few red ember-eyes, but the moonlight was bright and by it he could see nothing at all.

Hrissa growled at him reproachfully for a silly sleep-breaker. He damned himself for mistaking the after-image of a dream for reality. He damned the whole girlless, girl-vision-breeding Cold Waste. A bit of the night's growing chill spilled down his neck. He told himself he should be fast asleep like the wise Mouser over there, gathering strength for tomorrow's great effort. He lay back and after some time he slumbered.

Next morning the Mouser and Fafhrd woke at the first gray of dawn, the moon still bright as a snowball in the west, and quickly breakfasted and readied themselves and stood facing Obelisk Polaris in the stinging cold, all girls forgot, their manhood directed solely at the mountain.

Fafhrd stood in high-laced boots with newly-sharpened thick hobnails. He wore a wolf-skin tunic, fur turned in but open now from neck to belly. His lower arms and legs were bare. Short-wristed rawhide gloves covered his hands. A rather small pack, wrapped in his cloak, rode high on his back. Clipped to it was a large coil of black hempen rope. On his stout unstudded belt, his sheathed axe on his right side balanced on the other

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a knife, a small waterskin, and a bag of iron spikes headed by rings.

The Mouser wore his ramskin hood, pulled close around his face now by its drawstring, and on his body a tunic of gray silk, triple layered. His gloves were longer than Fafhrd's and fur-lined. So were his slender boots which were footed with crinkly behemoth hide. On *his* belt his dagger Cat's Claw and his waterskin balanced his sword Scalpel, its scabbard thonged loosely to his thigh. While to his cloak-wrapped pack was secured a curiously thick, short, black bamboo rod headed with a spike at one end and at the other a spike and large hook, somewhat like that of a shepherd's crook.

Both men were deeply tanned and leanly muscular, in best trim for climbing, hardened by the Trollsteps and the Cold Waste, their chests a shade larger than ordinary from weeks of subsisting on the latter's thin air.

No need to search out the best-looking ascent—Fafhrd had done that yesterday as they'd approached the Obelisk.

THE ponies were cropping again, and one had found the salt and was licking it with his thick tongue. The Mouser looked around for Hrissa to cuff her cheek in farewell, but the ice-cat was sniffing out a spoor beyond the campsite, her ears a-prick.

"She makes a cat-parting," Fafhrd said. "Good."

A faint shade of rose touched the heavens and the glacier by White Fang. Scanning toward the latter, the Mouser drew in his breath and squinted hard, while Fafhrd gazed narrowly from under the roof of his palm.

"Brownish figures," the Mouser said at last. "Kranarch and Gnarfi always dressed in brown leather, I recall. But I make them more than two."

"I make them four," Fafhrd said. "Two strangely shaggy—clad in brown fur suits, I guess. And all four mounting from the glacier up the rock wall."

"Where the gale will—" the Mouser began, then looked up. So did Fafhrd.

The Grand Pennon was gone.

"You said that sometimes—" the Mouser began.

"Forget the gale and those two and their rough-edged reinforcements," Fafhrd said curtly. He faced around again at Obelisk Polaris. So did the Mouser.

Squinting up the greenish-white slope, his head bent sharply back, the Mouser said, "This morning he seems somewhat steeper even than that north wall and rather extensive upward."

"Pah!" Fafhrd retorted. "As a child I would climb him before breakfast. Often." He raised his

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clenched right rawhide glove as if it held a baton, and cried, "We go!"

With that he strode forward and without a break began to walk up the knobbly face—or so it seemed, for although he used handholds he kept his body far out from the rock, as a good climber should.

The Mouser followed in Fafhrd's steps and holds, stretching his legs farther and keeping somewhat closer to the cliff.

MIDMORNING and they were still climbing without a break. The Mouser ached or stung in every part. His pack was like a fat man on his back, Scalpel a sizable boy clinging to his belt. And his ears had popped five times.

Just above, Fafhrd's boots clashed rock-knobs and into rock-holes with an unhesitating mechanistic rhythm the Mouser had begun to hate. Yet he kept his eyes resolutely fixed on them. Once he had looked down between his own legs and decided not to do that again.

It is not good to see the blue of distance, or even the gray-blue of middle distance, below one.

So he was taken by surprise when a small white bearded face, bloodily encumbered, came bobbing up alongside and past him.

Hrissa halted on a ledgelet by Fafhrd and took great whistling breaths, her tufted belly-skin pressing up against her spine with each exhalation. She breathed only through her pinkish nostrils because her jaws were full of two snow-hares, packed side by side, with dead heads and hindquarters a-dangle.

Fafhrd took them from her and dropped them in his pouch and laced it shut.

Then he said, just a shade grandiloquently, "She has proved her endurance and skill, and she has paid her way. She is one of us."

It had not occurred to the Mouser to doubt any of that. It seemed to him simply that there were three comrades now climbing Obelisk Polaris. Besides, he was most grateful to Hrissa for the halt she had brought. Partly to prolong it, he carefully pressed a handful of water from his bag and stretched it to her to lap. Then he and Fafhrd drank a little too.

All the long summer day they climbed the west wall of the cruel but reliable Obelisk. Fafhrd seemed tireless. The Mouser got his second wind, lost it, and never quite got his third. His whole body was one great leaden ache, beginning deep in his bones and filtering outward, like refined poison, through his flesh. His vision became a bob-

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bing welter of real and remembered rock knobs, while the necessity never to miss one single grip or foot-placement seemed the ruling of an insane schoolmaster god. He silently cursed the whole maniacal Stardock Project, cackling in his brain at the idea that the luring stanzas on the parchment could mean anything but pipe dreams. Yet he would not cry quits or seek again to prolong the brief breathers they took.

He marveled dully at Hrissa leaping and hunching up beside them. But by midafternoon he noted she was limping and once he saw a light blood-print of two pads where she'd set a paw.

They made camp at last almost two hours before sunset, because they'd found a rather wide ledge—and because a very light snowfall had begun, the tiny flakes sifting silently down like meal.

They made a fire of resin-pellets in the tiny claw-footed brazier Fafhrd packed, and they heated over it water for herb tea in their single narrow high pot. The water was a long time getting even lukewarm. With Cat's Claw the mouser stirred two dollops of honey into it.

The ledge was as long as three men stretched out and as deep as one. On the sheer face of Obelisk Polaris that much space seemed an acre, at least.

Hrissa stretched slackly behind the tiny fire. Fafhrd and the Mouser huddled to either side of it, their cloaks drawn around them, too tired to look around, talk, or even think.

The snowfall grew a little thicker, enough to hide the Cold Waste far below.

After his second swallow of sweetened tea, Fafhrd asserted they'd come at least two thirds of the way up the Obelisk.

The Mouser couldn't understand how Fafhrd could pretend to know that, any more than a man could tell by looking at the shoreless waters of the Outer Sea how far he'd sailed across it. To the Mouser they were simply in the exact center of a dizzily tip-tilted plain of pale granite, green-tinged and now snow-sprinkled. He was still too weary to outline this concept to Fafhrd, but he managed to make himself say, "As a child you would climb up and down the Obelisk before breakfast?"

"We had rather late breakfasts then," Fafhrd explained gruffly.

"Doubtless on the afternoon of the fifth day," the Mouser concluded.

AFTER the tea was drunk, they heated more water and left the hacked and disjointed bits of one of the snow-hares in the fluid until they turned gray, then

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slowly chewed them and drank the dull soup. At about the same time Hrissa became a little interested in the flayed carcass of the other hare set before her nose—by the brazier to keep it from freezing. Enough interested to begin to haggle it with her fangs and slowly chew and swallow.

The Mouser very gently examined the pads of the ice-cat's paws. They were worn silk-thin, there were two or three cuts in them, and the white fur between them was stained deep pink. Using a feather touch, the Mouser rubbed salve into them, shaking his head the while. Then he nodded once and took from his pouch a large needle, a spool of thin thong, and a rolled small hide of thin tough leather. From the last he cut with Cat's Claw a shape rather like a very fat pear and stitched from it a boot for Hrissa.

When he tried it on the ice-cat's hind paw, she let it be for a little, then began to bite at it rather gently, looking up queerly at the Mouser. He thought, then very carefully bored holes in it for ice-cat's non-retracting claws, then drew the boot up the leg snugly until the claws protruded fully and tied it there with the drawstring he'd run through slits at the top.

Hrissa no longer bothered the boot. The Mouser made others, and Fafhrd joined in and cut and stitched one too.

When Hrissa was fully shod in her four clawed paw-mittens, she smelled each, then stood up and paced back and forth the length of the ledge a few times, and finally settled herself by the still-warm brazier and the Mouser, chin on his ankle.

THE tiny grains of snow were still falling ruler-straight, frosting the ledge and Fafhrd's coppery hair. He and the Mouser began to pull up their hoods and lace their cloaks about them for the night. The sun still shone through the snowfall, but its light was filtered white and brought not an atom of warmth.

Obelisk Polaris was not a noisy mountain, as many are—a-drip with glacial water, rattling with rock slides, and even with rock-strata a-creak from uneven loss or gain of heat. The silence was profound.

The Mouser felt an impulse to tell Fafhrd about the living girl-mask or illusion he'd seen by night, while simultaneously Fafhrd considered recounting to the Mouser his own erotic dream.

At that moment there came again, without prelude, the rushing in the silent air and they saw, clearly outlined by the falling snow, a great flat undulating shape.

It came swooping past them,

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rather slowly, about two spear-lengths out from the ledge.

There was nothing at all to be seen except the flat flakeless space the thing made in the air-borne snow and the eddies it raised; it in no way obscured the snow beyond. Yet they felt the gust of its passage.

The shape of this invisible thing was most like that of a giant skate or sting-ray four yards long and three wide; there was even the suggestion of a vertical fin and a long, lashing tail.

"Great invisible fish!" the Mouser hissed, thrusting his hand down in his half-laced cloak and managing to draw Scalpel in a single sweep. "Your mind was rightest, Fafhrd, when you thought it wrong!"

As the snow-sketched apparition glided out of sight around the buttress ending the ledge to the south, there came from it a mocking rippling laughter in two voices, one alto, one soprano.

"A sightless fish that laughs like girls—most monstrous!" Fafhrd commented shakenly, hefting his axe, which he'd got out swiftly too, though it was still attached to his belt by a long thong.

THEY crouched there then for a while, scrambled out of their cloaks and with weapons ready, waiting the invisible monster's return, Hrissa standing between them with fur bristling. But after a while they began to shake from the cold and so they perforce got back into their cloaks and laced them, though still gripping their weapons and prepared to throw off the upper lacings in a flash. Then they briefly discussed the weirdness just witnessed, insofar as they could, each now confessing his earlier visions or dream of girls.

Finally the Mouser said, "The girls might have been riding the invisible thing lying along its back—and invisible too! Yet, what *was* the thing?"

This touched a small spot in Fafhrd's memory. Rather unwillingly he said, "I remember waking once as a child in the night and hearing my father say to my mother,—'. . . like great thick quivering sails, but the ones you can't see are the worst.' They stopped speaking then, I think because they heard me stir."

The Mouser asked, "Did your father ever speak of seeing girls in the high mountains—flesh, apparition, or witch, which is a mix of the two; visible or invisible?"

"He wouldn't have mentioned 'em if he had," Fafhrd replied. "My mother was a very jealous woman and a devil with a chopper."

The whiteness they'd been

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scanning turned swiftly to darkest gray. The sun had set. They could no longer see the falling snow. They pulled up their hoods and laced their cloaks tight and huddled together at the back of the ledge with Hrissa close between them.

TROUBLE came early the next day. They roused with first light, feeling battered and nightmareridden, and uncramped themselves with difficulty while the morning ration of strong herb tea and caked powdered meat and snow were stewed in the same pot to a barely unwarm aromatic gruel. Hrissa gnawed her rewarmed hare's-bones and accepted a little bear's fat and water from the Mouser.

The snow had stopped during the night, but the Obelisk was powdered with it on every step and hold, while under the snow was ice—the first-fallen snow melted by yesterday afternoon's meager warmth in the rock and quickly refrozen.

So Fafhrd and the Mouser roped together, and the Mouser swiftly fashioned a harness for Hrissa by cutting two holes in the long side of an oblong of leather. Hrissa protested somewhat when her forelegs were thrust through the holes and the ends of the oblong double-stitched together snugly over her shoulders. But when an end of Fafhrd's black hempen rope was tied round her harness where the stitching was, she simply lay down flat on the ledge, on the warm spot where the brazier had stood, as if to say, "This debasing tether I will not accept, though humans may."

But when Fafhrd slowly started up the wall and the Mouser followed and the rope tightened on Hrissa, and when she had looked up and seen them still roped like herself, she followed sulkily after. A little later she slipped off a bulge—her boots, snug as they were, must have been clumsy to her after naked pads—and swung scrabbling back and forth several long moments before she was supporting her own weight again. Fortunately the Mouser had a firm stance at the time.

After that, Hrissa came on more cheerily, sometimes even climbing to the side ahead of the Mouser and smiling back at him—rather sardonically, the Mouser fancied.

The climbing was a shade steeper than yesterday with an even greater insistence that each hand- and foot-hold be perfect. Gloved fingers must grip stone, not ice; spikes must clash through the brittle stuff to rock. Fafhrd roped his axe to his right wrist and used its hammer to tap away treacherous thin platelets and curves of the glassy frozen water.

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And the climbing was more wearing because it was harder to avoid tenseness. Even looking sideways at the steepness of the wall tightened the Mouser's groin with fear. He wondered, what if the wind should blow?—and fought the impulse to cling flat to the cliff. Yet at the same time sweat began to trickle down his face and chest, so that he had to throw back his hood and loosen his tunic to his belly to keep his clothes from sogging.

But there was worse to come. It had looked as though the slope above were gentling, but now, drawing nearer, they perceived a bulge jutting out a full two yards some seven yards above them. The under-slope was pocked here and there—fine handholds, except that they opened down.

The bulge extended as far as they could see to either side, at most points looking worse.

They found themselves the best and highest holds they could, close together, and stared up at their problem. Even Hrissa, a-cling by the Mouser, seemed subdued.

Fafhrd said softly, "I mind me now they used to say there was an out-jutting round the Obelisk's top. His Crown, I think my father called it. I wonder. . . ."

"Don't you know?" the Mouser demanded, a shade harshly. Standing rigid on his holds, his arms and legs were aching worse than ever.

"O Mouser," Fafhrd confessed, "in my youth I never climbed Obelisk Polaris farther than halfway to last night's camp. I only boasted to raise our spirits."

THERE being nothing to say to that, the Mouser shut his lips, though somewhat thinly. Fafhrd began to whistle a tuneless tune and carefully fished a small grapnel with five dagger-sharp flukes from his pouch and tied it securely to the long end of their black rope still coiled on his back. Then stretching his right arm as far out as he might from the cliff, he whirled the grapnel in a smallish circle, faster and faster, and finally hurled it upward. They heard it clash against rock somewhere above the bulge, but it did not catch on any crack or hump and instantly came sliding and then dropping down, missing the Mouser by hardly a hand's breadth, it seemed to him.

Fafhrd drew up the grapnel—with some delays, since it tended to catch on every crack or hump below them—and whirled and hurled it again. And again and again and again, each time without success. Once it stayed up, but Fafhrd's first careful tug on the rope brought it down.

Fafhrd's sixth cast was his

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first really bad one. The grapnel never went out of sight at all. As it reached the top of the throw, it glinted for an instant.

"Sunlight!" Fafhrd hissed happily. "We're almost to the summit!"

"That 'almost' is a whopper, though," the Mouser commented, but even he couldn't keep a cheerful note out of his voice.

By the time Fafhrd had failed on seven more casts, all cheerfulness was gone from the Mouser again. His aches were horrible, his hands and feet were numbing in the cold, and his brain was numbing too, so that the next time Fafhrd cast and missed, he was so unwise as to follow the grapnel with his gaze as it fell.

For the first time today he really looked out and down. The Cold Waste was a pale blue expanse almost like the sky—and seeming even more distant—all its copses and mounds and tiny tarns long since become pinpoints and vanished. Many leagues to the west, almost at the horizon, a ragged pale gold band showed where the shadows of the mountains ended. Midway in the band was a blue gap—Stardock's shadow continuing over the edge of the world.

Giddily the Mouser snatched his gaze back to Obelisk Polaris . . . and although he could still see the granite, it didn't seem to count any more—only four insecure holds on a kind of pale green nothingness, with Fafhrd and Hrissa somehow suspended beside him. His mind could no longer accept the Obelisk's steepness.

AS the urge to hurl himself dowr swelled in him, he somehow transformed it into a sardonic snort, and he heard himself say with daggerish contempt, "Leave off your foolish fishing, Fafhrd! I'll show you now how Lankhmarian mountain science deals with a trifling problem such as this which has baffled all your barbarian whirling and casting!"

And with that he unclipped from his pack with reckless speed the thick black bamboo pike or crook and began cursingly with numb fingers to draw out and let snap into place its telescoping sections until it was four times its original length.

This tool of technical climbing, which indeed the Mouser had brought all the way from Lankhmar, had been a matter of dispute between them the whole trip, Fafhrd asserting it was a tricksy toy not worth the packing.

Now, however, Fafhrd made no comment, but merely coiled up his grapnel and thrust his hands into his wolfskin jerkin against his sides to warm them, and mild-eyed watched the Mouser's

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furious activity. Hrissa shifted to a perch closer to Fafhrd and crouched stoically.

But when the Mouser shakily thrust the narrower end of his black tool toward the bulge above, Fafhrd reached out a hand to help him steady it, yet could not refrain from saying, "If you think to get a good enough hold with the crook on the rim to shinny up that stick—"

"Quiet, you loutish kibitzer!" the Mouser snarled and with Fafhrd's help thrust the pike-end into a pock in the rock hardly a finger's breadth from the rim. Then he seated the spiked foot of the pole in a small, deep hollow just above his head. Next he snapped out two short recessed lever-arms from the base of the pole and began to rotate them. It soon became clear that they controlled a great screw hidden in the pole, for the latter lengthened until it stood firmly between the two pocks in the rock, while the stiff black shaft itself bent a little.

At that instant a sliver of rock, being pressed by the pole, broke off from the rim. The pole thrummed as it straightened and the Mouser, screaming a curse, slipped off his holds and fell.

It was good then that the rope between the two comrades was short and that the spikes of Fafhrd's boots were seated firmly, like so many demon-forged dagger-points, in the rock of his footholds—for as the strain came suddenly on Fafhrd's belt and on his rope-gripping left hand, he took it without plummeting after the Mouser, only bending his knees a little and grunting softly, while his right hand snatched hold of the vibrating pole and saved it.

The Mouser had not even fallen far enough to drag Hrissa from her perch, though the rope almost straightened between them. The ice-cat, her tufted neck bent sharply between foreleg and chest, peered down with great curiosity at the dangling man.

After slumping from his belt for several seconds, like one shocked dead, the Mouser came to and slowly and pantingly climbed back.

HIS face was ashen. Fafhrd made no mark of that, but simply handed him the black pole, saying, "It's a good tool. I've screwed it back short. Seat it in another pock and try again."

Soon the pole stood firm between the hollow by the Mouser's head and a pock a hand's breadth from the rim. The bowlike bend in the pole faced downward. Then they put the Mouser first on the rope, and he went climbing up and out along the pole,

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hanging from it back downward, his boot-edges finding tiny holds on the pole's section-shoulders—out into and over the vast, pale blue-gray space which had so lately dizzied him.

The pole began to bend a little more with the Mouser's weight, the pike-end slipping a finger's breadth in the upper pock with a horrible tiny grating sound, but Fafhrd gave the screw another turn and the pole held firm.

FAFHRD and Hrissa watched the Mouser reach its end, where he paused briefly. Then they saw him reach up his left arm until it was out of sight to the elbow above the rim, meanwhile gripping with his right hand the crook and twining his legs around the shaft. He appeared to feel about with his left hand and find something. Then he moved out and up still further and very slowly his head and after it, in a sudden swift sweep, his right arm went out of sight above the rim.

For several long moments they saw only the bottom half of the bent Mouser, his dark crinkly-soled boots twined securely to the end of the pole. Then, rather slowly, like a gray snail, and with a final push of one boot against the top of the crook, he went entirely out of sight.

Fafhrd slowly paid out rope after him.

After some time the Mouser's voice, quite ghostly yet clear, came down to them: "Hola! I've got the rope anchored around a boss big as a tree stump. Send up Hrissa."

So Fafhrd put Hrissa on the rope ahead of him, knotting it to her harness with a sheepshank.

Hrissa fought desperately for a moment against being swung into space, but as soon as it was done hung deathly still. Then as she was drawn slowly up, Fafhrd's knot began to slip. The ice-cat swiftly snatched at the rope with her teeth and gripped it far back between her jaws. The moment she came near the rim, her clawed mittens were ready and she scrabbled and was dragged out of sight.

Soon word came down from the Mouser that Hrissa was safe and Fafhrd might follow. He frowningly tightened the screw another half turn, though the pole creaked ominously, and then very gently climbed out along it. The Mouser now kept the rope taut from above, but for the first stretch it could hardly take more than a few pounds of Fafhrd's weight off the pole.

The upper spike once again grated horribly a bit in its pock, but it still held firm. Helped more by the rope now, Fafhrd got his hands and head over the rim.

What he saw was a smooth,

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gentle rock slope, which could be climbed by friction, and at the top of it the Mouser and Hrissa standing backgrounded by blue sky and gilded by sunlight.

Soon he stood beside them.

The Mouser said, "Fafhrd, when we get back to Lankhmar remind me to give Glinthi the Artificer thirteen diamonds from the pouch of them we'll find on Stardock's hat: one for each section and joint of my climbing pole, one each for the spikes at the ends and two for each screw."

"Are there two screws?" Fafhrd asked respectfully.

"Yes, one at each end," the Mouser told him and then made Fafhrd brace rope for him so that he could climb down the slope and, bending all his upper body down over the rim, shorten the pole by rotating its upper screw until he was able to drag it triumphantly back over the top with him.

As the Mouser telescoped its sections together again, Fafhrd said to him seriously, "You must thong it to your belt as I do my axe. We must not chance losing Glinthi's help on the rest of this journey."

THROWING back their hoods and opening their tunics wide to the hot sun, Fafhrd and the Mouser looked around, while Hrissa luxuriously stretched and worked her slim limbs and neck and body, the white fur of which hid her bruises.

Both men were somewhat exalted by the thin air and filled brain-high with the ease of mind and spirit that comes with a great danger skillfully conquered.

Rather to their amazement, the southward swinging sun had climbed barely halfway to noon. Perils which had seemed demi-hours long had lasted minutes only.

The summit of Obelisk Polaris was a great rolling field of pale rock too big to measure by Lankhmar acres. They had arrived near the southwest corner, and the gray-tinted stone meadow seemed to stretch east and north almost indefinitely. Here and there were hummocks and hollows, but they swelled and dipped most gently. There were a few scattered large boulders, not many, while off to the east were darker indistinct shapes which might be bushes and small trees footed in cracks filled with blown dirt.

"What lies east of this mountain chain?" the Mouser asked. "More Cold Waste?"

"Our clan never journeyed there," Fafhrd answered. He frowned. "Some taboo on the whole area, I think. Mist always masked the east on my father's great climbs—or so he told us."

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"We could have a look now," the Mouser suggested.

Fafhrd shook his head. "Our course lies there," he said, pointing northeast, where Stardock rose like a giantess standing tall but asleep, or feigning sleep, looking seven times as big and high at least as she had before the Obelisk hid her top two days ago.

The Mouser said, a shade dolefully, "All our brave work scaling the Obelisk has only made Stardock higher. Are you sure there's not another peak, perhaps invisible, on top of her?"

Fafhrd nodded without taking his eyes off her, who was empress without consort of the Mountains of the Giants. Her Tresses had grown to great swelling rivers of snow and now the two adventurers could see faint stirrings in them—avalanches slipping and tumbling.

THE Southern Tress came down in a great dipping double curve toward the northwest corner of the mighty rock summit on which they stood.

At the top, Stardock's corniced snow-hat, its upper rim glittering with sunlight as if it were edged around with diamonds, seemed to nod toward them a trifle more than ever it had before, and the demurely-eyed Face with it, like a great lady hinting at possible favors.

But the gauzy, long pale veils of the Grand and Petty Pennons no longer streamed from her Hat. The air atop Stardock must be as still at the moment as it was where they stood upon the Obelisk.

"What devil's luck that Kranarch and Gnarfi should tackle the north wall the one day in eight the gale fails!" Fafhrd cursed. "But 'twill be their destruction yet—yes, and of their shaggy-clad two henchmen too. This calm can't hold."

"I recall now," the Mouser remarked, "that when we caroused with 'em in Illik-Ving, Gnarfi drunken-claimed he could whistle up winds—had learned the trick from his grandmother—

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and could whistle 'em down too, which is more to the point."

"The more reason for us to haste!" Fafhrd cried, upping his pack and slipping his big arms through the wide shoulder straps. "On, Mouser! Up, Hrissa! We'll have a bit and sup before the snow ridge."

"You mean we must tackle that freezing treacherous problem today?" demurred the Mouser, who would dearly have loved to strip and bake in the sun.

"Before noon!" Fafhrd decreed. And with that he set them a stiff walking pace straight north, keeping close to the summit's west edge, as if to countermand from the start any curiosity the Mouser might have about a peek to the east. The latter followed with only minor further protests, while Hrissa came on limpingly, lagging at first far behind, but catching up as her limp went and her cat-zest for newness grew.

And so they marched across the great, strange rolling granite plain of Obelisk-top, patched here and there with limestone stretches white as marble. Its sun-drenched silence and uniformity became eerie after a bit. The shallowness of its hollows was deceptive: Fafhrd noted several in which battalions of armed men might have hidden a-crouch, unseen until one came within spearcast.

The longer they strode along, the more closely Fafhrd studied the rock his hobnails clashed. Finally he paused to point out a strangely rippled stretch.

"I'd swear that once was seabottom," he said softly.

The Mouser's eyes narrowed. Thinking of the great invisible fishlike flier they had seen last evening, its raylike form undulating through the snowfall, he felt gooseflesh crawling on him.

Hrissa slunk past them, head a-weave.

Soon they passed the last boulder, a huge one, and saw, scarce a bowshot ahead, the glitter of snow.

The Mouser said, "The worst thing about mountain climbing is that the easy parts go so quickly."

"Hist!" warned Fafhrd, sprawling down suddenly like a great four-legged water beetle and putting his cheek to the rock. "Do you hear it, Mouser?"

Hrissa snarled, staring about, and her white fur bristled.

The Mouser started to stoop, but realized he wouldn't have to, so fast the sound was coming on: a general high-pitched drumming, as of five hundred fiends rippling their giant thick fingernails on a great stone drumhead.

THEN without pause there came surging straight toward them over the nearest rock-swell-

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ing to the southeast, a great wide-fronted stampede of goats, so packed together and their fur so glossy white that they seemed for a flash like an onrushing of living snow. Even the great curving horns of their leaders were ivory-hued. The Mouser noted that a stretch of the sunny air just above their center shimmered and wavered as it will above a fire. Then he and Fafhrd were racing back toward the last boulder with Hrissa bounding ahead.

Behind them the devil's-tattoo of the stampede grew louder and louder.

They reached the boulder and vaulted atop it, where Hrissa already crouched, hardly a pounding heartbeat before the white horde. And well it was that Fafhrd had his axe out the instant they won there, for the midmost of the great billies sprang high, forelegs tucked up and head bowed to present his creamy horns—so close Fafhrd could see their splintered tips. But in that same instant Fafhrd got him in his snowy shoulder with a great swashing deep-cleaving blow so heavy that the beast was carried past them to the side and crashed on the short slope leading down to the rim of the west wall.

Then the white stampede was splitting around the great boulder, the animals so near and packed that there was no longer room for leaping, and the din of their hooves and the gasping and now the frightened bleating was horrendous, and the caprid stench was stifling, while the boulder rocked with their passage.

In the worst of the bruit there was a momentary down-rushing of air, briefly dispelling the stench, as something passed close above their heads, rippling the sky like a long flapping blanket of fluid glass, while through the clangor could be heard for a moment a harsh hateful laughter.

The lesser tongue of the stampede passed between the boulder and the rim, and of these goats many went tumbling over the edge with bleats like screams of the damned, carrying with them the body of the great billy Fafhrd had maimed.

THEN sudden in its departure as a snow-squall that dismasts a ship in the Frozen Sea, the stampede was past them and pounding south, swinging east somewhat from the deadly rim, with the last few of the goats, chiefly nannies and kids, bounding madly after.

Pointing his arm toward the sun as if for a sword-thrust, the Mouser cried furiously, "See there, where the beams twist all askew above the herd! It's the same flier as just now overpassed us and last night we saw in the

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snowfall—the flier who raised the stampede and whose riders guided it against us! Oh, damn the two deceitful ghostly bitches luring us on to a goaty destruction stinking worse than a temple orgy in the City of Ghouls!"

"I thought this laughter was far deeper," Fafhrd objected. "It was not the girls."

"So they have a deep-throated pimp—does that improve them in your eyes? Or your great flapping lovestruck ears?" the Mouser demanded angrily.

The drumming of the stampede had died away even swifter than it had come, and in the newfallen silence they heard now a happy half-obstructed growling. Hrissa, springing off the boulder at stampede-end, had struck down a fat kid and was tearing at its bloodied white neck.

"Ah, I can smell it broiling now!" the Mouser cried with a great smile, his preoccupations altering in less than an instant. "Good Hrissa! Fafhrd, if those be treelets and bushes and grass to the east—and they must be that, for what else feeds these goats?—there's sure to be dead wood—why, there may even be mint!—and we can. . . ."

"You'll eat the flesh raw for lunch or not at all!" Fafhrd decreed fiercely. "Are we to risk the stampede again? Or give the sniggering flier a chance to marshal against us some snow lions?—which are sure to be there too to prey on the goats. And are we to present Kranarch and Gnarfi the summit of Stardock on a diamond-studded silver platter?—if this devil's lull holds tomorrow too and they be industrious strong climbers, not nice-bellied sluggards like one I could name!"

So, with only a gripe or two more from the Mouser, the kid was swiftly bled, gutted and skinned, and some of its spine-meat and haunches wrapped and packed for supper. Hrissa drank some more blood and ate half the liver and then followed the Mouser and Fafhrd as they set off north toward the snow-ridge. The two men were chewing thin-sliced peppered collops of raw kid, but striding swiftly and keeping a wary eye behind for another stampede.

The Mouser expected now at last to get a view of the eastern depths, by peering east along the north wall of Obelisk Polaris, but here again he was foiled by the first great swell of the snow-saddle.

However, the northern view was fearsomely majestic. A full half league below them now and seen almost vertically on, the White Waterfall went showering down mysteriously, twinkling even in the shadow.

The ridge by which they must travel first curved up a score

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of yards, then dipped smoothly down to a long snow-saddle another score of yards below them, then slowly curved up into the South Tress, down which they could now plainly see avalanches trickling and tumbling.

IT was easy to see how the northeast gale, blowing almost continually but missing the Ladder, would greatly pile up snow between the taller mountain and the Obelisk—but whether the rocky connection between the two mountains underlay the snow by only a few yards or by as much as a quarter league was impossible to know.

"We must rope again," Fafhrd decreed. "I'll go first and cut steps for us across the west slope."

"What need we steps in this calm?" the Mouser demanded. "Or to go by the west slope? You just don't want me to see the east, do you? The top of the ridge is broad enough to drive two carts across abreast."

"The ridge-top in the wind's lee almost certainly overhangs emptiness to the east and would break away," Fafhrd explained. "Look you, Mouser, do I know more about snow and ice or do you?"

"I once crossed with you the Bones of the Old Ones," the Mouser retorted, shrugging. "There was snow there, I recall."

"Pooh, the mere spillings of a lady's powderbox compared to this. No, Mouser, this stretch my word is law."

"Very well," the Mouser agreed.

So they roped up rather close—in order, Fafhrd, Mouser, and Hrissa—and without more ado Fafhrd donned his gloves and thonged his axe to his wrist and began cutting steps for them around the shoulder of the snow-swell.

It was rather slow work, for under a dusting of powder snow the stuff was hard and for each step Fafhrd must make at least two cuts—first an inchopping backhanded one to make the step, then a down-chop to clear it. And as the slope grew steeper, he must make the steps somewhat closer together. The steps he made were rather small, at least for his great boots, but they were sure.

Soon the ridge and the Obelisk cut off the sun. It grew very chill. The Mouser closed his tunic and drew his hood around his face, while Hrissa between her short leaps from step to step performed a kind of tiny cat-jig on them, to keep her gloved paws from freezing. The Mouser reminded himself to stuff them a bit with lamb's wool when he renewed the salve. He had out his pike now, telescoped short and thonged to his wrist.

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THEY passed the shoulder of the snow-swell and came opposite the beginning of the snow saddle, but Fafhrd did not cut steps up toward it. Rather, the steps he now was cutting descended at a sharper angle than the saddle dipped, though the slope they were crossing was becoming quite steep.

"Fafhrd," the Mouser protested quietly, "we're heading for Stardock's top, not the White Waterfall."

"You said, 'Very well,'" Fafhrd retorted between chops. "Besides, who does the work?" His axe rang as it bit into ice.

"Look, Fafhrd," the Mouser said, "there are two goats crossing to Stardock along the saddle-top. No, three."

"We should trust goats? Ask yourself why they've been sent." Again Fafhrd's axe rang.

The sun swung into view as it coursed southward, sending their three shadows ranging far ahead of them. The pale gray of the snow turned glittery white. The Mouser unhooded to the yellow rays. For a while the enjoyment of their warmth on the back of his head helped him keep his mouth shut, but then the slope grew steeper yet, as Fafhrd continued remorselessly to cut steps downward.

"I seem to recall that our purpose was to *climb* Stardock, but my memory must be disordered," the Mouser observed. "Fafhrd, I'll take your word we must keep away from the top of the ridge, but do we have to keep away so *far?* And the three goats have all skipped across."

Still, "'Very well,' you said," was all Fafhrd would answer, and this time there was a snarl in his voice.

The Mouser shrugged. Now he was bracing himself with his pike continuously, while Hrissa would pause studyingly before each leap.

Their shadows went less than a spear's cast ahead of them now, while the hot sun had begun to melt the surface snow, sending down trickles of ice water to wet their gloves and make their footing unsure.

Yet still Fafhrd kept cutting steps downward. And now of a sudden he began to cut them downward more steeply still, adding with taps of his axe a tiny handhold above each step—and these handholds were needed!

"Fafhrd," the Mouser said dreamily, "perhaps an ice-sprite has whispered you the secret of levitation, so that from this fine take-off you can go spiring to Stardock's top. In that case I wish you'd teach myself and Hrissa how to grow wings in an instant."

"Hist!" Fafhrd spoke softly yet sharply at that instant. "I have a feeling. Something comes.

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Brace yourself and watch behind us."

THE Mouser drove his pike in deep and rotated his head. As he did, Hrissa leaped from the step last behind to the one on which the Mouser stood, landing half on his boot and clinging to his knee—yet this done so dexterously the Mouser was not dislodged.

"I see nothing," the Mouser reported, staring almost sunward. Then, words of a sudden clipped: "Again the beams twist like a spinning lantern! The glints on the ice ripple and wave. 'Tis the flier come again! Cling!"

There came the rushing sound, louder than ever before and swiftly mounting, then a great sea-wave of air, as of a great body passing swiftly only spans away, that whipped their clothes and Hrissa's fur and forced them to cling fiercely to their holds, though Fafhrd made a full-armed swipe with his axe. Hrissa snarled. Fafhrd almost louted forward off his holds with the momentum of his blow.

"I'll swear I scored on him, Mouser," he snarled, recovering. "My axe touched something besides air."

"You hair-brained fool!" the Mouser cried. "Your scratches will anger him and bring him back." He let go the chopped ice-hold with his hand and steadying himself by his pike, he searched the sun-bright air ahead and around for ripples.

"More like I've scared him off," Fafhrd asserted, doing the same. The rushy sound faded and did not return, the air became quiet, the steep slope grew very still, even the water-drip faded.

Turning back to the wall with a grunt of relief, the Mouser touched emptiness. He grew still as death himself. Turning his eyes only he saw that upward from a point level with his knees the whole snow-ridge had vanished—the whole saddle and a section of the swell to either side of it—as if some great god had reached down while the Mouser's back was turned and removed that block of reality.

Giddily he clung to his pike. He was standing atop a newly created snow-saddle now. Beyond and below its raw fresh-fractured white eastern slope, the silently-departed great snow-cornice was falling faster and faster, still in one hill-size chunk.

BEHIND them the steps Fafhrd had cut mounted to the new snow-rim, then vanished.

"See, I chopped us down far enough only in the nick," Fafhrd grumbled. "My judgement was faulty."

The falling cornice was snatched downward out of sight, so that the Mouser and Fafhrd at

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last could see what lay east of the Mountains of the Giants: a rolling expanse of dark green that might be treetops except that from here giant trees would be tinier than grass blades—an expanse even farther below them than the Cold Waste at their backs. Beyond the green-carpeted depression, another mountain range loomed like the ghost of one.

"I have heard legends of the Great Rift Valley," Fafhrd murmured. "A mountain-sided cup for sunlight, its warm floor a league below the Waste."

Their eyes searched.

"Look," Mouser said, "how trees climb the eastern face of Obelisk almost to his top. Now the goats don't seem so strange."

They could see nothing, however, of the east face of Stardock.

"Come on!" Fafhrd commanded. "If we linger, the invisible growl-laughtered flier may gather courage to return despite my axe-nick."

And without further word he began resolutely to cut steps onward . . . and still a little down.

Hrissa continued to peer over the rim, her bearded chin almost resting on it, her nostrils a-twitch as if she faintly scented gossamer threads of meat-odor mounting from the leagues distant dark green, but when the rope tightened on her harness, she followed.

PERILS came thick now. They reached the dark rock of the Ladder only by chopping their way along a nearly vertical ice wall in the twinkly gloom under a close-arching waterfall of snow that shot out from an icy boss above them—perhaps a miniature version of the White Waterfall that was Stardock's skirt.

When they stepped at last, numb with cold and hardly daring believe they'd made it, onto a wide dark ledge, they saw a jumble of bloody goat tracks in the snow around.

Without more warning than that, a long snowbank between that step and the next above reared up its nearest white end a dozen feet and hissed fearsomely,

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showing it to be a huge serpent with head big as an elk's, all covered with shaggy snow-white fur. Its great violet eyes glared like those of a mad horse and its jaw gaped to show slashing-teeth like a shark's and two great fangs jetting a mist of pale ichor.

The furred serpent hesitated for two sways between the nearer, taller man with flashing axe and the farther, smaller one with thick black stick. In that pause Hrissa with snarling hisses of her own sprang forward past the Mouser on the downslope side and the furred serpent struck at this newest and most active foe.

Fafhrd got a blast of its hot acrid breath, and the vapor-trail from its nearer fang bathed his left elbow.

The Mouser's attention was fixed on a fur-wisped violet eye big as a girl's fist.

Hrissa looked down the monster's gaping dark red gullet rimmed by slaver-swimming ivory knives and the two ichor-jetting fangs.

Then the jaws clashed shut, but in the intervening instant Hrissa had leaped back more swiftly even than she'd advanced.

The Mouser plunged the pike-end of his climbing pole into the glaring violet eye.

Swinging his axe two-handed, Fafhrd slashed at the furry neck just back of the horse-like skull, and there gushed out red blood which steamed as it struck the snow.

Then the three climbers were scrambling upward, while the monster writhed in convulsions which shook the rock and spattered with red alike the snow and its snow-white fur.

AT what they hoped was a safe distance above it, the climbers watched it dying, though not without frequent glances about for creatures like it or other perilous beasts.

Fafhrd said, "A hot-blooded serpent, a snake with fur—it goes against experience. My father never spoke of such; I doubt he ever met 'em."

The Mouser said, "Now we know the worm of the poem and what lairs in the Lairs."

Hrissa peered down and hissed softly.

"What food can such great meat-eaters find here?" Fafhrd wanted to know. The monster's convulsions were growing feebler; the rock barely jarred at each ponderous tail-stroke.

The Mouser answered, "I'll wager they find their prey on the east slope of Stardock and come here only to lair or breed. Perhaps the invisible flier drove the three goats over the snow saddle to lure this one." His voice grew dreamy. "Or perhaps there's a secret world inside Stardock."

Fafhrd shook his head, as if to

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clear it of such imagination-snaring visions. "Our way lies upward," he said. "We'd best be well above the Lairs before nightfall. Give me a dollop of honey when I drink," he added, loosening his water bag as he turned and scanned up the face.

From its base the Ladder was a dark narrow triangle climbing to the blue sky between the snowy ever-tumbling Tresses. First there were the ledges on which they stood, easy at first, but swiftly growing steeper. Next an almost blank stretch, etched here and there with shadows and ripplings hinting at part-way climbing routes, but none of them connected. Then another band of ledges, the Roosts. Then a stretch still blanker than the first. Finally another ledge-band, narrower and shorter—the Face—and atop all what seemed a tiny pen-stroke of white ink: the brim of Stardock's pennonless snowy hat.

All the Mouser's aches and weariness came back as he squinted up the Ladder while feeling in his pouch for the honey jar. Never, he was sure, had he seen so much distance compressed into so little space by vertical foreshortening. It was as if the gods had built a ladder to reach the sky, and after using it had kicked most of the steps away. But he clenched his teeth and prepared to follow Fafhrd.

ALL their previous climbing began to seem book-simple to that they now struggled through, step by straining step, all the long summer afternoon. Where Obelisk Polaris had been a stern schoolmaster, Stardock was a mad queen, tireless in preparing her shocks and surprises, unpredictable in her wild caprices.

The ledges of the Lairs were built of rock that sometimes broke away at a touch, and they were piled with loose gravel. Also, the climbers made acquaintance with Stardock's rocky avalanches, which brought stones whizzing and spattering down around them without warning, so that they had to press close to the walls and Fafhrd almost regretted leaving his helmet in the cairn. Hrissa first snarled at each pelting pebble which hit near her, but when at last struck in the side by a small one, showed fear and slunk close to the Mouser, trying until rebuked to push between the wall and his legs.

And once they saw a cousin of the white worm they had slain reared up man-high and glaring at them from a distant ledge, but it did not attack.

They had to work their way to the northernmost point of the topmost ledge before they found, at the very edge of the Northern Tress, almost underlying its streaming snow, a scree-choked gulley which narrowed upward to

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a wide vertical groove—or chimney, as Fafhrd called it.

And when the treacherous scree was at last surmounted, the Mouser discovered that the next stretch of the ascent was indeed very like climbing up the inside of a rectangular chimney of varying width and with one of the four walls missing—that facing outward to the air. Its rock was sounder than that of the Lairs, but that was all that could be said for it.

Here all tricks of climbing were required and the utmost of main strength into the bargain. Sometimes they hoisted themselves by cracks wide enough for finger- and toe-holds; if a crack they needed were too narrow, Fafhrd would tap into it one of his spikes to make a hold, and this spike must be unwedged after use and recovered. Sometimes the chimney narrowed so that they could walk up it laboriously with shoulders to one wall and boot-soles to the other. Twice it widened and became so smooth-walled that the Mouser's extensible climbing-pike had to be braced between wall and wall to give them a necessary step.

And five times the chimney was blocked by a huge rock or chockstone which in falling had wedged itself fast, and these fearsome obstructions had to be climbed around on the outside, generally with the aid of one or more of Fafhrd's spikes driven between chockstone and wall, or his grapnel tossed over it.

"Stardock has wept millstones in her day," the Mouser said of these gigantic barriers, jerking his body aside from a whizzing rock for a period to his sentence.

This climbing was generally beyond Hrissa and she must often be carried on the Mouser's back, or left on a chockstone or one of the rare paw-wide ledges and hoisted up when opportunity offered. They were strongly tempted, especially after they grew death-weary, to abandon her, but could not forget how her brave feint had saved them from the white worm's first stroke.

All this, particularly the passing of the chockstones, must be done under the pelting of Stardock's rocky avalanches—so that each new chockstone above them was welcomed as a roof, until it had to be surmounted. Also, snow sometimes gushed into the chimney, overspilling from one of the snowy avalanches forever whispering down the North Tress—one more danger to guard against. Ice water runneled too from time to time down the chimney, drenching boots and gloves and making all holds unsure.

In addition, there was less nourishment in the air, so that they had more often to halt and gasp deeply until their lungs were satisfied. And Fafhrd's left

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arm began to swell where the venomous mist from the worm's fang had blown around it, until he could hardly bend it at the elbow or crook its swollen fingers to grip crack or rope. Besides, it itched and stung. He plunged it again and again into snow to no avail.

THEIR only allies on this most punishing ascent were the hot sun, heartening them by its glow and offsetting the growing frigidity of the thin still air, and the very difficulty and variety of the climb itself, which at least kept their minds off the emptiness around and beneath them—the latter a farther drop than they'd ever stood over on the Obelisk. The Cold Waste seemed another world, poised separate from Stardock in space.

Once they forced themselves to eat a bite and several times sipped water. And once the Mouser was seized with mountain sickness, ending only when he had retched himself weary.

The only incident of the climb unrelated to Stardock's mad self occurred when they were climbing out around the fifth chockstone, slowly, like two large slugs, the Mouser first this time and bearing Hrissa, with Fafhrd close behind. At this point the North Tress narrowed so that a hump of the North Wall was visible across the snow stream.

There was a whirring unlike that of any rock. Another whirring then, closer and ending in a *thunk*. When Fafhrd scrambled atop the chockstone and into the shelter of the walls, he had a cruelly barbed arrow through his pack.

At cost of a third arrow whirring close by his head, the Mouser peeped out north with Fafhrd clinging to his heels and swiftly dragging him back.

"'Twas Kranarch all right, I saw him twang his bow," the Mouser reported. "No sight of Gnarfi, but one of their new comrades clad in brown fur crouched behind Gnarfi, braced on the same boss. I couldn't see his face, but 'tis a most burly fellow, short of leg."

"They keep apace of us," Fafhrd grunted.

"Also, they scruple not to mix climbing with killing," the Mouser observed as he broke off the tail of the arrow piercing Fafhrd's pack and yanked out the shaft. "Oh, comrade, I fear your sleeping cloak is sixteen times holed. And that little bladder of pine liniment—it got holed too. Ah, what fragrance!"

"I'm beginning to think those two men of Illik-Ving aren't sportsmen," Fafhrd asserted. "So . . . up and on!"

They were all dog-weary, even cat-Hrissa, and the sun was barely ten finger-breadths (at

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the end of an outstretched arm) above the flat horizon of the Waste; and something in the air had turned Sol white as silver—he no longer sent warmth to combat the cold. But the ledges of the Roosts were close above now, and it was possible to hope they would offer a better camp-site than the chimney.

So although every man- and cat-muscle protested against it, they obeyed Fafhrd's command.

Halfway to the Roosts it began to snow, powdery grains falling arrow-straight like last night, but thicker.

This silent snowfall gave a sense of serenity and security which was most false, since it masked the rockfalls which still came firing down the chimney like the artillery of the God of Chance.

Five yards from the top a fist-size chunk struck Fafhrd glancingly on the right shoulder, so that all his good arm went numb and hung useless, but the little climbing that remained was so easy he could make it with boots and puffed-up barely-usable left hand.

HE peeped cautiously out of the chimney's top, but the Tress here had thickened up again, so that there was no sight of the North Wall. Also the first ledge was blessedly wide and so overhung with rock that not even snow had fallen on its inner half, let alone stones. He scrambled up eagerly, followed by the Mouser and Hrissa.

But even as they cast themselves down to rest at the back of the ledge, the Mouser wriggling out of his heavy pack and unthonging his climbing-pike from his wrist—for even *that* had become a torturesome burden—they heard a now-familiar rushing in the air and there came a great flat shape swooping slowly through the sun-silvered snow which outlined it. Straight at the ledge it came and this time it did not go past, but halted and hung there, like a giant devil-fish nuzzling the sea's rim, while ten narrow marks, each of suckers in line, appeared in the snow on the ledge's edge, as of ten short tentacles gripping there.

From the center of this monstrous invisibility rose a smaller snow-outlined invisibility of the height and thickness of a man. Midway up this pillar-shape was one visible thing: a slim sword of dark gray blade and silvery hilt, pointed straight at the Mouser's breast.

Suddenly the sword shot forward, almost as fast as if spear-hurled, but not quite, and after it, as swiftly, the man-size pillar, which now laughed harshly from its top.

The Mouser snatched up one-handed his unthonged climbing

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pike and thrust at the snow-sketched figure behind the sword.

The gray sword snaked around the pike and with a sudden sharp twist swept it from the Mouser's fatigue-slack fingers.

THE black tool on which Glinthi the Artificer had expended all the evenings of the Month of the Weasel three years past, vanished into the silvery snowfall and space.

Hrissa backed against the wall frothing and snarling, a-tremble in every limb.

Fafhrd fumbled frantically for his axe, but his swollen fingers could not even unsnap the sheath binding its head to his belt.

The Mouser, enraged at the loss of his precious pike to the point where he cared not a whit whether his foe were invisible or not, drew Scalpel from its sheath and fiercely parried the gray sword as it came streaking in again.

A dozen parries he had to make and was pinked twice in the arm and pressed back against the wall almost like Hrissa, before he could take the measure of his foe, now out of the snowfall and wholly invisible, and go himself on the attack.

Then glaring at a point a foot above the gray sword—a point where he judged his foe's eyes to be (if his foe carried his eyes in his head)—he went stamping forward, beating at the gray blade, slipping Scalpel around it with the tiniest disengages, seeking to bind it with his own sword, and ever thrusting impetuously at invisible arm and trunk.

Three times he felt his blade strike flesh and once it bent briefly against invisible bone.

His foe leaped back onto the invisible flier, making narrow footprints in the slush gathered there. The flier rocked.

In his fighting rage the Mouser almost followed his foe onto that invisible, living pulsating platform, yet prudently stopped at the brink.

And well it was he did so, for the flier dropped away like a skate in flight from a bank-hunting wildcat, shaking off its slush into the snowfall. There came a last burst of laughter more like a wail, fading off and down in the silvery murk.

The Mouser began to laugh himself, a shade hysterically, and retreated to the wall. There he wiped off his blade and felt the stickiness of invisible blood, and laughed a wild high laugh again.

Hrissa's fur was still on end—and was a long time flattening.

Fafhrd quit trying to fumble out his axe and said seriously, "The girls couldn't have been with him—we'd have seen their forms or footprints on the slush-backed flier. I think he's jealous of us and works against 'em."

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The Mouser laughed—merely sillily now—for a third time.

The murk turned dark gray. They set about firing the brazier and making ready for night. Despite their hurts and supreme weariness, the shock and fright of the last encounter had excited new energy from them and soon raised their spirits and gave them appetites. They feasted well on thin collops of kid frizzled in the resin-flames or cooked pale gray in water that, strangely, could be sipped without hurt almost while it boiled.

Power of movement began to return to Fafhrd's right arm and his left was swelling no more. The Mouser salved and bandaged his own small wounds, then remembered to salve Hrissa's pads and tuck into her boots before he laced them on again a little pine-scented eiderdown tweaked from the arrow-holes in Fafhrd's cloak.

WHEN they were half laced up in their cloaks, Hrissa snuggled between them—and a few more precious resin-pellets in the brazier as a bedtime luxury—Fafhrd got out a tiny jar of strong wine of Ilthmar, and they each took a sup of it, imagining those sunny vineyards and that hot rich soil so far south.

A momentary flare from the brazier showed them the snow falling yet. A few rocks crashed nearby and a snowy avalanche hissed, then Stardock grew still in the frigid grip of night. The climbers' eyrie seemed most strange to them, set above every other peak in the Mountains of the Giants—and likely all Nehwon—yet walled with darkness like a tiny room.

The Mouser said softly, "Now we know what roosts in the Roosts. Do you suppose there are dozens of those invisible mantas carpeting around us on ledges like this, or a-hang from them? Why don't they freeze? Or does someone stable them? And the invisible folk, what of them? No more can you call 'em mirage—you saw the sword, and I fought the man-thing at the other end of it. Yet invisible! How's that possible?"

Fafhrd shrugged and then winced because it hurt both shoulders cruelly. "Made of some stuff like water or glass," he hazarded. "Yet pliant and twisting the light less—and with no surface shimmer. You've seen sand and ashes made transparent by firing. Perhaps there's some heatless way of firing monsters and men until they are invisible."

"But how light enough to fly?" the Mouser asked.

"Thin beasts to match thin air," Fafhrd guessed sleepily.

The Mouser said, "And then those deadly worms—and the Fiend knows what perils above." He paused. "And yet we must

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still climb Stardock to the top, mustn't we? Why?"

FAFHRD nodded. "To beat out Kranarch and Gnarfi . . . ," he muttered. "To beat out my father . . . the mystery of it . . . the girls. . . . O Mouser, could you stop here any more than you could stop after touching half of a woman?"

"You don't mention diamonds any more," the Mouser noted. "Don't you think we'll find them?"

Fafhrd started another shrug and mumbled a curse that turned into a yawn.

The Mouser dug in his pouch to the bottom pocket and brought out the parchment and blowing on the brazier read it all by the resin's last flaming:

Who mounts white Stardock, the Moon Tree,
Past worm and gnome and unseen bars,
Will win the key to luxury:
The Heart of Light, a pouch of stars.
The gods who once ruled all the world
Have made that peak their citadel,
From whence the stars were one time hurled
And paths lead on to Heav'n and Hell.

Come, heroes, past the Trollstep rocks.
Come, best of men, across the Waste.
For you, each glory door unlocks.
Delay not, up, and come in haste.

Who scales the Snow King's citadel
Shall father his two daughters' sons;
Though he must face foes fierce and fell,
His seed shall live while time still runs.

The resin burnt out. The Mouser said, "Well, we've met a worm and one unseen fellow who sought to bar our way—and two sightless witches who might be Snow King's daughters for all I know. Gnomes now—they would be a change, wouldn't they? You said something about Ice Gnomes, Fafhrd. What was it?"

He waited with an unnatural anxiety for Fafhrd's answer. After a bit he began to hear it: soft regular snores.

The Mouser snarled soundlessly, his demon of restlessness now become a fury despite all his aches. He shouldn't have thought of girls!—or rather of one girl who was nothing but a taunting mask with pouting lips and eyes of black mystery seen across a fire.

Suddenly he felt stifled. He quickly unhooked his cloak and despite Hrissa's questioning mew felt his way south along the

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ledge. Soon snow, sifting like ice needles on his flushed face, told him he was beyond the overhang. Then the snow stopped. Another overhang, he thought—but he had not moved. He strained his eyes upward, and there was the black expanse of Stardock's topmost quarter silhouetted against a band of sky pale with the hidden moon and specked by a few faint stars. Behind him to the west, the snowstorm still obscured the sky.

He blinked his eyes and then he swore softly, for now the black cliff they must climb tomorrow was a-glow with soft scattered lights of violet and rose and palest green and amber. The nearest, which were still far above, looked tinily rectangular, like gleam-spilling windows seen from below.

It was as if Stardock were a great hostelry.

Then freezing flakes pinked his face again, and the band of sky narrowed to nothing. The snowfall had moved back against Stardock once more, hiding all stars and other lights.

The Mouser's fury drained from him. Suddenly he felt very small and foolhardy and very very cold. The mysterious vision of the lights remained in his mind, but muted, as if part of a dream. Most cautiously he crept back the way he had come, feeling the radiant warmth of Fafhrd and Hrissa and the burnt-out brazier just before he touched his cloak. He laced it around him and lay for a long time doubled up like a baby, his mind empty of everything except frigid blackness. At last he slumbered.

NEXT day started gloomy. The two men chafed and wrestled each other as they lay to get the stiffness a little out of them and enough warmth in to rise. Hrissa withdrew from between them limping and sullen.

At any rate, Fafhrd's arms were recovered from their swelling and numbing, while the Mouser was hardly aware of his own arm's little wounds.

They breakfasted on herb tea and honey and began climbing the Roosts in a light snowfall. This last pest stayed with them all morning except when gusty breezes blew it back from Stardock. On these occasions they could see the great smooth cliff separating the Roosts from the ultimate ledges of the Face. By the glimpses they got, the cliff looked to be without any climbing routes whatever, or any marks at all—so that Fafhrd laughed at the Mouser for a dreamer with his tale of windows last night spilling colored light—but finally as they neared the cliff's base they began to distinguish what seemed a narrow crack—a hairline to vision—mounting its center.

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They met none of the invisible flat fliers, either a-wing or a-perch, though whenever gusts blew strange gaps into the snowfall, the two adventurers would firm themselves on their perches and grip for their weapons, and Hrissa would snarl.

The wind slowed them little though chilling them much, for the rock of the Roosts was true.

And they still had to watch out for stony peltings, though these were fewer than yesterday, perhaps because so much of Stardock now lay below them.

They reached the base of the great cliff at the point where the crack began, which was a good thing, since the snowfall had grown so heavy that a hunt for it would have been difficult.

To their joy, the crack proved to be another chimney, scarce a yard across and not much more deep, and as knobbly inside with footholds as the cliff outside was smooth. Unlike yesterday's chimney, it appeared to extend upward indefinitely without change of width and as far as they could see there were no chockstones. In many ways it was like a rock ladder half sheltered from the snow. Even Hrissa could climb here, as on Obelisk Polaris.

They lunched on food warmed against their skins. They were afire with eagerness, yet forced themselves to take time to chew and sip. As they entered the chimney, Fafhrd going first, there came three faint growling booms—thunder perhaps and certainly ominous, yet the Mouser laughed.

With never-failing footholds and with opposite wall for backbrace, the climbing was easy, except for the drain on main strength, which required rather frequent halts to gulp down fresh stores of the thin air. Only twice did the chimney narrow so that Fafhrd had to climb for a short stretch with his body outside it; the Mouser, slighter framed, could stay inside.

It was an intoxicating experience, almost. Even as the day grew darker from the thickening snowfall and as the crackling booms returned sharper and stronger—thunder now for sure, since they were heralded by brief palings up and down the chimney—snow-muted lightning flashes the Mouser and Fafhrd felt merry as children mounting a mysterious twisty stairway in a haunted castle. They even wasted a little breath in joking calls which went echoing faintly up and down the rugged shaft as it paled and gloomed with the lightning.

But then the shaft grew by degrees almost as smooth as the outer cliff and at the same time it began gradually to widen, first a hand's breadth, then another, then a finger more, so that they

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had to mount more perilously, bracing shoulders against one wall and boots against the other and so "walking" up with pushes and heaves. The Mouser drew up Hrissa and the ice-cat crouched on his pitching, rocking chest—no inconsiderable burden. Yet both men still felt quite jolly—so that the Mouser began to wonder if there might not be some actual intoxicant in air near Heaven.

Being a head or two taller than the Mouser, Fafhrd was better equipped for this sort of climbing and was still able to go on at that moment when the Mouser realized that his body was stretched almost straight between shoulders and boot-soles—with Hrissa a-crouch on him like a traveler on a little bridge. He could mount no farther—and was hazy about how he had managed to come this far.

FAFHRD came down like a great spider at the Mouser's call and seemed not much impressed by the latter's plight—in fact, a lightning flash showed his great bearded face all a-grin.

"Abide you here a bit," he said. "'Tis not so far to the top. I think I glimpsed it the last flash but one. I'll mount and draw you up, putting all the rope between you and me. There's a crack by your head—I'll knock in a spike for safety's sake. Meanwhile, rest."

Whereupon Fafhrd did all of these things so swiftly and was on his upward way again so soon that the Mouser forebore to utter any of the sardonic remarks churning inside his rigid belly.

Successive lightning flashes showed the Northerner's long-limbed form growing smaller at a gratifyingly rapid rate until he looked hardly bigger than a trap spider at the end of his tube. Another flash and he was gone, but whether because he had reached the top or passed a bend in the chimney the Mouser couldn't be sure.

The rope kept paying upward, however, until there was only a small loop below the Mouser. He was aching abominably now and was also very cold, but gritted his teeth against the pain. Hrissa chose this moment to prowl up and down her small human bridge, restlessly. There was a blinding lightning flash and a crash of thunder that shook Stardock. Hrissa cringed.

The rope grew taut, tugging at the belt of the Mouser, who started to put his weight on it, holding Hrissa to his chest, but then decided to wait for Fafhrd's call. This was a good decision on his part, for just then the rope went slack and began to fall on the Mouser's belly like a stream of black water. Hrissa crouched away from it on his face. It came pelting endlessly, but finally its

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upper end hit the Mouser under the breastbone with a snap. The only good thing was that Fafhrd didn't come hurtling down with it. Another blinding mountain-shaking crash showed the upper chimney utterly empty.

"Fafhrd!" the Mouser called. "*Fafhrd!*" There came back only the echo.

THE Mouser thought for a bit, then reached up and felt by his ear for the spike Fafhrd had struck in with a single offhand slap of his axe-hammer. Whatever had happened to Fafhrd, nothing seemed to remain to do but tie rope to spike and descend by it to where the chimney was easier.

The spike came out at the first touch and went clattering shrilly down the chimney until a new thunderblast drowned the small sound.

The Mouser decided to "walk" down the chimney. After all, he'd come up that way the last few score of yards.

The first attempt to move leg told him his muscles were knotted by cramp. He'd never be able to bend leg and straighten it again without losing his purchase and falling.

The Mouser thought of Glinthi's pike, lost in white space, and he slew that thought.

Hrissa crouched on his chest and gazed down into his face with an expression the next levin-glare showed to be sad yet critical, as if to ask, "Where is this vaunted human ingenuity?"

FAFHRD had barely eased himself out of the chimney onto the wide, deep rock-roofed ledge at its top, when a door two yards high, a yard wide, and two spans thick had silently opened in the rock at the back of the ledge.

The contrast was most remarkable between the roughness of that rock and the ruler-flat smoothness of the dark stone forming the thick sides of the door and the lintel, jambs, and threshold of the doorway.

Soft pink light spilled out and with it a perfume whose heavy fumes were cargoed with dreams of pleasure barges afloat in a rippling sunset sea.

Those musky narcotic fumes, along with the alcoholic headiness of the thin air, almost made Fafhrd forget his purpose, but touching the black rope was like touching Hrissa and the Mouser at its other end. He unknotted it from his belt and prepared to secure it around a stout rock pillar beside the open door. To get enough rope to make a good knot he had to draw it up quite tight.

But the dream-freighted fumes grew thicker, and he no longer felt the Mouser and Hrissa in the rope. Indeed, he began to forget his two comrades altogether.

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And then a silvery voice—a voice he knew well from having heard it laugh once and once chuckle—called, "Come in, barbarian. Come in to me."

The end of the black rope slipped from his fingers unnoticed and hissed softly across the rock and down the chimney.

Stooping a little, he went through the doorway which silently closed behind him just in time to shut out the Mouser's desperate call.

He was in a room lit by pink globes hanging at the level of his head. Their soft warm radiance colored the hangings and rugs of the room, but especially the pale spread of the great bed that was its only furniture.

Beside the bed stood a slim woman whose black silk robe concealed all of her except her face, yet did not disguise her body's sleek curves. A black lace mask hid the rest of her.

She looked at Fafhrd for seven thudding heartbeats, then sat down on the bed. A slender arm and like hand clothed all in black lace came from under her robe and patted the spread beside her and rested there. Her mask never wavered from Fafhrd's face.

He shouldered out of his pack and unbuckled his axe belt.

THE Mouser finished pounding all the thin blade of his dagger into the crack by his ear, using the firestone from his pouch for hammer, so that sparks showered from every cramped stroke of stone against pommel—small lightning flashes to match the greater flares still chasing up and down the chimney, while their thunder crashed an obbligato to the Mouser's taps. Hrissa crouched on his ankles, and from time to time the Mouser glared at her, as if to say, "Well, cat?"

A gust of snow-freighted wind roaring up the chimney momentarily lifted the lean shaggy beast a span above him and almost blew the Mouser loose, but he tightened his pushing muscles still more and the bridge, though arching upward a trifle, held firm.

He had just finished knotting an end of the black rope around the dagger's cross guard and grip—and his fingers and forearms were almost useless with fatigue—when a window two feet high and five wide silently opened in the back of the chimney, its thick rock shutter sliding aside, not a span away from the Mouser's inward shoulder.

A red glow sprang from the window and somewhat illumined four faces in a row staring out of it—wide snoutish faces with piggy black eyes and with low hairless domes above.

The Mouser considered them. They were all four of extreme ugliness, he decided dispassion-

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ately. Only their wide white teeth, showing between their grinning lips which almost joined ear to swinish ear, had any claim to beauty.

Hrissa sprang at once through the red window and disappeared. The two faces between which she jumped did not flicker a black button-eye.

Then eight short brawny arms came out and easily pried the Mouser out and lifted him inside. He screamed faintly from a sudden increase in the agony of his cramps. He was aware of thick dwarfish bodies clad in hairy black jerkins and breeks—and one in a black hairy skirt—but all with thick-nailed splay-feet bare. Then he fainted.

When he came to, it was because he was being punishingly massaged on a hard table, his body naked and slick with warm oil. He was in a low ill-lit chamber and still closely surrounded by the four dwarves, as he could tell from the eight horny hands squeezing and thumping his muscles before he ever opened his eyes.

The dwarf kneading his right shoulder and banging the top of his spine crinkled his warty eyelids and bared his beautiful white teeth bigger than a giant's in what might be intended for a friendly grin. Then he said in an atrocious Mingol patois, "I am Bonecracker. This is my wife Gibberfat. Cosseting your body on the larboard side are my brothers Legcruncher and Breakskull. Now drink this wine and follow me."

The wine stung, yet dispelled the Mouser's dizziness, and it was certainly a blessing to be free of the murderous massage —and also apparently of the cramp-lumps in his muscles.

Bonecracker and Gibberfat helped him off the slab while Legcruncher and Breakskull rubbed him quickly down with rough towels. The warm low-ceilinged room rocked dizzily for a moment; then he felt wondrous fine.

Bonecracker waddled off into the dimness beyond the smoky torches. With never a question the Mouser followed the dwarf. Or were these Fafhrd's Ice Gnomes? he wondered.

Bonecracker pulled aside heavy drapes in the dark. Amber light fanned out. The Mouser stepped from rock-roughness onto down-softness. The drapes swished to behind him.

He was alone in a chamber mellowly lit by hanging globes like great topazes—yet he guessed they would bounce aside like puffballs if touched. There was a large wide couch and beyond it a low table against the arras-hung wall with an ivory stool set before it. Above the table was a great silver mirror,

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while on it were fantastic small bottles and many tiny ivory jars.

No, the room was not altogether empty. Hrissa, sleekly groomed, lay curled in a far corner. She was not watching the Mouser, however, but a point above the stool.

The Mouser felt a shiver creeping on him, yet not altogether one of fear.

A dab of palest green leaped from one of the jars to the point Hrissa was watching and vanished there. But then he saw a streak of reflected green appear in the mirror. The riddlesome maneuver was repeated, and soon in the mirror's silver there hung a green mask, somewhat clouded by the silver's dullness.

Then the mask vanished from the mirror and simultaneously reappeared unblurred hanging in the air above the ivory stool. It was the mask the Mouser knew achingly well—narrow chin, high-arched cheeks, straight nose and forehead.

THE pouty wine-dark lips opened a little and a soft throaty voice asked, "Does my visage displease you, man of Lankhmar?"

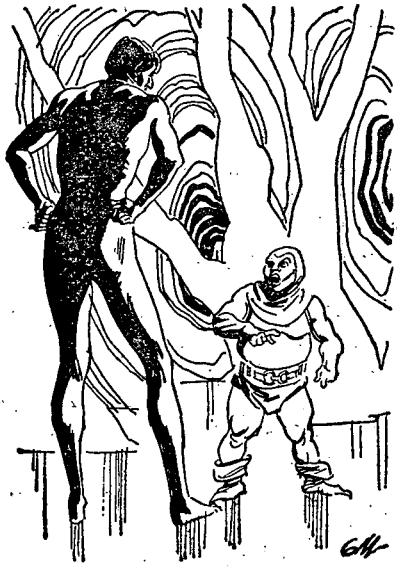
"You jest cruelly, O Princess," the Mouser replied, drawing on all his aplomb and sketching a courtier's bow, "for you are Beauty's self."

Slim fingers, half outlined now in pale green dipped into the unguent jar and took up a more generous dab.

The soft throaty voice that so well matched half the laughter he had once heard in a snowfall, now said, "You shall judge all of me."

FAFHRD woke in the dark and touched the girl beside him. As soon as he knew she was awake too, he grasped her by the hips. When he felt her body stiffen, he lifted her into the air and held her above him as he lay flat on his back.

She was wondrous light, as if made of pastry or eiderdown, yet when he laid her beside him again, her flesh felt as firm as



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any, though smoother than most.

"Let us have a light, Hirriwi, I beg you," he said.

"That were unwise, Faffy," she answered in a voice like a curtain of tiny silver bells lightly brushed. "Have you forgot that now I am wholly invisible? —which might tickle some men, yet you, I think. . . ."

"You're right, you're right, I like you real," he answered, gripping her fiercely by the shoulders to emphasize his feelings, then guiltily jerking away his hands as he thought of how delicate she must be.

The silver bells clashed in full laughter, as if the curtain of them had been struck a great swipe. "Have no fears," she told him. "My airy bones are grown of matter stronger than steel. It is a riddle beyond your philosophers and relates to the invisibility of my race and of the animals from which it sprang. Think how strong tempered glass can be, yet light goes through it. My cursed brother Faroomfar has the strength of a bear for all his slimness, while my father Oomforafor despite his centuries is a very lion. Your friend's encounter with Faroomfar was no final test—but oh how it made him howl!—father raged at him—and then there are the cousins. Soon as this night be ended—which is not soon, my dear, the moon still climbs—you must return down Stardock. Promise me that. My heart grows cold at thought of the dangers you've already faced—and was like ice I know not how many times this last three-day."

"Yet you never warned us," he mused. "You lured me on."

"Can you doubt why?" she asked. He was feeling her snub nose then and her apple cheeks, and so he felt her smile too. "Or perhaps you resent it that I let you risk your life a little to win here to this bed?"

He implanted a fervent kiss on her wide lips to show her how little true that was, but she thrust him back after a moment.

"Wait, Faffy dear," she said. "No, wait, I say! I know you're greedy and impetuous, but you can at least wait while the moon creeps the width of a star. I asked you to promise me you would descend Stardock at dawn."

THERE was a rather long silence in the dark.

"Well?" she prompted.

"What shuts your mouth?" she queried impatiently. "You've shown no such indecision in certain other matters. Time wastes, the moon sails."

"Hirriwi," Fafhrd said softly, "I must climb Stardock."

"Why?" she demanded ringingly. "The poem has been ful-

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filled. You have your reward. Go on, and only frigid fruitless perils await you. Return, and I'll guard you from the air—yes, and your companion too—to the very Waste." Her sweet voice faltered a little. "O Faffy, am I not enough to make you forego the conquest of a cruel mountain? In addition to all else, I love you—if I understand rightly how mortals use that word."

"No," he answered her solemnly in the dark. "You are wondrous, more wondrous than any wench I've known—and I love you, which is not a word I bandy—yet you only make me hotter to conquer Stardock. Can you understand that?"

Now there was silence for a while in the other direction.

"Well," she said at length, "you are masterful and will do what you will do. And I have warned you. I could tell you more, show you reasons counter, argue further, but in the end I know I would not break your stubbornness—and time gallops. We must mount our own steeds and catch up with the moon. Kiss me again. Slowly. So."

THE Mouser lay across the foot of the bed under the amber globes and contemplated Keyaira, who lay lengthwise with her slender pale green shoulders and tranquil sleeping face propped by many pillows.

He took up the corner of a sheet and moistened it with wine from a cup set against his knee and with it rubbed Keyaira's slim right ankle—so gently that there was no change in her narrow bosom's slow-paced rise and fall. Presently he had cleared away all the greenish unguent from a patch as big as half his palm. He peered down at his handiwork. This time he expected surely to see flesh, or at least the green cosmetic on the underside of her ankle, but no, he saw through the irregular little rectangle he'd wiped only the bed's tufted coverlet reflecting the amber light from above. It was a most fascinating and somewhat unnerving mystery.

He glanced questioningly over at Hrissa, who now lay on an end of the low table, the thin-glassed fantastic perfume bottles standing around her, while she contemplated the occupants of the bed, her white tufted chin set on her folded paws. It seemed to the Mouser that she was looking at him with disapproval, so he hastily smoothed back unguent from other parts of Keyaira's leg until the peep-hole was once more greenly covered.

THERE was a low laugh. Keyaira, propped on her elbows now, was gazing at him through slitted heavy-lashed eyelids.

"We invisibles," she said in a

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humorous voice truly or feignedly heavy with sleep, "show only the outward side of any cosmetic or raiment on us. It is a mystery beyond your seers."

"You are Mystery's queenly self a-walk through the stars," the Mouser pronounced, lightly caressing her green toes. "And I the most fortunate of men. I fear it's a dream and I'll wake on Stardock's frigid ledges. How is it I am here?"

"Our race is dying out," she said, "our men become sterile. Hirriwi and I are the only princesses left. Our brother Faroomfar hotly wished to be our consort—he still boasts his virility —'twas he you dueled with—but our father Oomforafor said, 'It must be new blood—the blood of heroes.' So the cousins and Faroomfar, he much against his will, must fly hither and yon and leave those little rhymed lures writ on ramskin in perilous lonely spots apt to tempt heroes."

"But how can visibles and invisibles mate?" he asked.

She laughed with delight. "Is your memory *that* short, Mouse?"

"I mean, have progeny," he corrected himself, a little irked, but not much, that she had hit on his boyhood nickname. "Besides, wouldn't such offspring be cloudy, a mix of seen and unseen?"

Keyaira's green mask swung a little from side to side. "My father thinks such matings will be fertile and that the children will breed true to invisibility—that being dominant over visibility—yet profit greatly in other ways from the admixture of hot, heroic blood."

"Then your father commanded you to mate with me?" the Mouser asked, a little disappointed.

"By no means, Mouse," she assured him. "He would be furious if he dreamt you were here, and Faroomfar would go mad. No, I took a fancy to you, as Hirriwi did to your comrade, when first I spied you on the Waste—very fortunate that was for you, since my father would have got your seed, if you had won to Stardock's top, in quite a different fashion. Which reminds me, Mouse, you must promise me to descend Stardock at dawn."

"That is not so easy a promise to give," the Mouser said. "Fafhrd will be stubborn, I know. And then there's that other matter of a bag of diamonds, if that's what a pouch of stars means—oh, it's but a trifle, I know, compared to the embraces of a glorious girl . . . still. . . ."

"But if I say I love you?—
—which is only truth. . . ."

"Oh, Princess," the Mouser sighed, gliding his hand to her knee. "How can I leave you at dawn? Only one night. . . ."

"Why, Mouse," Keyaira broke

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in, smiling roguishly and twisting her green form a little, "do you not know that every night is an eternity? Has not any girl taught you that yet, Mouse? I am astonished. Think, we have half an eternity left us yet—which is also an eternity, as your geometer, whether white-bearded or dainty-breasted, should have taught you."

"But if I am to sire many children—" the Mouser began.

"Hirriwi and I are somewhat as queen bees," Keyaira explained, "but think not of that. We have eternity tonight, 'tis true, but only if we make it so. Come closer."

A little later, plagiarizing himself somewhat, the Mouser said softly, "The sole fault of mountain climbing is that the best parts go so swiftly."

"They can last an eternity," Keyaira breathed in his ear. "Make them last, Mouse."

FAFHRD woke shaking with cold. The pink globes were gray and tossing in icy gusts from the open door. Snow had blown in on his clothes and gear scattered across the floor and was piled inches deep on the threshold, across which came also the only illumination—leaden daylight.

A great joy in him fought all these grim gray sights and conquered them.

Nevertheless he was naked and shivering. He sprang up and beat his clothes against the bed and thrust his limbs into their icy stiffness.

AS he was buckling his axebelt, he remembered the Mouser down in the chimney, helpless. Somehow all night, even when he'd spoken to Hirriwi of the Mouser, he'd never thought of that.

He snatched up his pack and sprang out on the ledge. From the corner of his eye he caught something moving behind him. It was the massive door closing.

A titan gust of snow-fisted wind struck him. He grabbed the rough rock pillar to which he'd last night planned to tie the rope and hugged it tight. The gods help the Mouser below! Someone came sliding and blowing along the ledge in the wind and snow and hugged the pillar lower down.

The gust passed. Fafhrd looked for the door. There was no sign of it. All the piled snow was redrifted. Keeping close hold of pillar and pack with one hand, he felt over the rough wall with the other. Fingernails no more than eyes could discover the slightest crack.

"So you got tossed out too?" a familiar voice said gayly. "*I* was tossed out by Ice Gnomes, I'll have you know."

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"Mouser!" Fafhrd cried. "Then you weren't—? I thought —"

"You never thought of me once all night, if I know you," the Mouser said. "Keyaira assured me you were safe and somewhat more than that. Hirriwi would have told you the same of me if you'd asked her. But of course you didn't."

"Then you too—?" Fafhrd demanded, grinning with delight.

"Yes, Prince Brother-in-Law," the Mouser answered him, grinning back.

They pommeled each other around the pillar a bit—to battle chill, but in sheer high spirits too.

"Hrissa?" Fafhrd asked.

"Warm inside, the wise one. They don't put out the cat here, only the man. I wonder, though. . . . Do you suppose Hrissa was Keyaira's to begin with and that she foresaw and planned. . . ." His voice trailed off.

No more gusts had come. The snowfall was so light they could see almost a league—up to the Hat above the snow-streaked ledges of the Face and down to where the Ladder faded out.

Once again their minds were filled, almost overpowered by the vastness of Stardock and by their own predicament: two half-frozen mites precariously poised on a frozen vertical world only distantly linked with Nehwon.

TO the south there was a pale silver disk in the sky—the sun. They'd been abed 'til noon.

"Easier to fashion an eternity out of an eighteen-hour night," the Mouser observed.

"We galloped the moon deep under the sea," Fafhrd mused.

"Your girl promise to make you go down?" the Mouser asked suddenly.

Fafhrd shook his head. "She tried."

"Mine too. And not a bad idea. The summit smells, by her account. But the chimney looks stuffed with snow. Hold my ankles while I peer over. Yes, packed solid all the way down. So—?"

"Mouser," Fafhrd said, almost gloomily, "whether there's a way down or no, I must climb Stardock."

"You know," the Mouser answered, "I am beginning to find something in that madness myself. Besides, the east wall of Stardock may hold an easy route to that lush-looking Rift Valley. So let's do what we can with the bare seven-hour o' light left us. Daytime's no stuff to fashion eternities."

MOUNTING the ledges of the Face was both the easiest and hardest climbing they'd had yet to do. The ledges were wide, but some of them sloped outward and were footed with rotten

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shale that went skidding away into space at a touch, and now and again there were brief traverses which had to be done by narrow cracks and main strength, sometimes swinging by their hands alone.

And weariness and chill and even dizzying faintness came far quicker at this height. They had to halt often to drink air and chafe themselves. While in the back of one deep ledge—Stardock's right eye, they judged—they were forced to spend time firing the brazier with all the remaining resin pellets, partly to warm food and drink, but chiefly to warm themselves.

Last night's exertions had weakened them too, they sometimes thought, but then the memories of those exertions would return to strengthen them.

And then there were the sudden treacherous wind-gusts and the constant yet variable snowfall, which sometimes hid the summit and sometimes let them see it clear against the silvery sky, with the great white outcurving brim of the Hat now poised threateningly above them—a cornice like that of the snow-saddle, only now they were on the wrong side.

The illusion grew stronger that Stardock was a separate world from Nehwon in snow-filled space.

Finally the sky turned blue and they felt the sun on their backs—they had climbed above the snowfall at last—and Fafhrd pointed at a tiny nick of blue deep in the brim of the Hat—a nick just visible above the next snow-streaked rock-bulge—and he cried, "The apex of the Needle's Eye!"

At that, something dropped into a snowbank beside them, and there was a muffled clash of metal on rock, while from the snow a nocked and feathered arrow-end stuck straight up.

They dodged under the protective roof of a bigger bulge as a second arrow and a third clashed against the naked rock on which they'd stood.

"Gnarfi and Kranarch have beaten us, curse 'em," Fafhrd hissed, "and set an ambush for us at the Eye, the obvious spot. We must go round about and get above 'em."

"Won't they expect that?"

"They were fools to spring their ambush too soon. Besides, we have no other tactic."

So they began to climb south, though still upward, always keeping rock or snow between them and where they judged the Needle's Eye to be, and at last when the sun was dropping swiftly toward the western horizon they came swinging back north again and still upward, stamping out steps now in the

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steepening bank of snow that reversed its curve above them to make the brim of the Hat that now roofed them ominously, covering two thirds of the sky. They sweated and shook by turns and fought off almost continuous bouts of giddy faintness, yet still strove to move as silently and warily as they might.

At last they rounded one more snow-bulge and found themselves looking down a snow slope at the great bare stretch of rock normally swept by the gale that came through the Needle's Eye to make the Petty Pennon.

ON the outward lip of the exposed rock were two men, clad both in suits of brown leather, much scuffed and here and there ripped, showing the inward-turned fur. Lank black-bearded elk-faced Kranarch stood whipping his arms against his chest for warmth. Beside him lay his strung bow and some arrows. While stocky boar-faced Gnarfi knelt peeping over the rim. Fafhrd wondered where were their two brown-clad bulky servitors.

The Mouser dug into his pouch. At the same moment Kranarch saw them and snatched up his weapon, though rather more slowly than he would have in thicker air. With a similar slowness the Mouser drew out the fist-size rock he had picked up several ledges below for just such a moment as this.

Kranarch's arrow whistled between his and Fafhrd's heads. A moment later the Mouser's rock struck Kranarch full on his bow-shoulder. The weapon fell from his hand and that arm dangled. Then Fafhrd and the Mouser charged recklessly down the snow slope, the former brandishing his unthonged axe, the latter drawing Scalpel.

Kranarch and Gnarfi received them with their own swords, and Gnarfi with a dagger in his left hand as well. The battle that followed had the same dreamlike slowness as the exchange of missiles. First Fafhrd's and the Mouser's rush gave them the advantage. Then Kranarch's and Gnarfi's great strength—or restedness, rather—told, and they almost drove their enemy off the rim. Fafhrd took a slash in the ribs which bit through his tough wolfskin tunic, slicing flesh a little and jarring bone.

But then skill told, as it generally will, and the two brown-clad men received wounds and suddenly turned and ran through the great white pointy-topped triangular archway of the Needle's Eye. Gnarfi as he ran screeched, "Graah! Kruk!"

"Doubtless calling for their shaggy-clad servants or bearers," the Mouser gasped in surmise, resting swordarm on knee, almost spent. "Farmerish fat

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country fellows those looked, hardly trained to weapons. We need not fear 'em greatly, I think, even if they come to Gnarfi's call." Fafhrd nodded, gasping himself. "Yet they climbed Stardock," he added dubiously.

JUST then there came galloping through the snowy archway on their hind legs with their nails clashing the windswept rock and their fang-edged slavering red mouths open wide and their great-clawed arms wide-spread —two huge brown bears.

With a speed which their human opponents had been unable to sting from them, the Mouser snatched up Kranarch's bow and sent two arrows speeding, while Fafhrd swung his axe in a gleaming circle and cast it. Then the two comrades sprang swiftly to either side, the Mouser wielding Scalpel and Fafhrd drawing his knife.

But there was no need for further fighting. The Mouser's first arrow took the leading bear in the neck, his second straight in its red mouth-roof and brain, while Fafhrd's axe sank to its helve between two ribs on the trailing bear's left side. The great animals pitched forward in their blood and death-throes and rolled twice over and went tumbling ponderously off the rim.

"Doubtless both shes," the Mouser remarked as he watched them fall. "Oh those bestial men of Illik-Ving! Still, to charm or train such beasts to carry packs and climb and even give up their poor lives. . . ."

"Kranarch and Gnarfi are no sportsmen, that's for certain now," Fafhrd pronounced. "Don't praise their tricks." He grimaced and swore as he stuffed a rag into his tunic over his wound.

Then the two comrades trudged slowly under the high tentlike arch of snow to survey the domain, highest on all Nehwon, of which they had made themselves masters—refusing from light-headed weariness to think, in that moment of triumph, of the invisible beings who were Stardock's lords. They went warily, yet not too much so, because Gnarfi and Kranarch had run scared and were wounded not trivially—and the latter had lost his bow.

Stardock's top behind the great toppling snow-wave of the Hat was almost as extensive north to south as that of Obelisk Polaris, yet the east rim looked little more than a long bowshot away. Snow with a thick crust beneath a softer layer covered it all except for the north end and stretches of the east rim, where bare dark rock showed.

The surface, both snow and rock, was flatter even than that

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of the Obelisk and sloped somewhat from north to south. There were no structures or beings visible, nor signs of hollows where either such might hide. Truth to tell, neither the Mouser nor Fafhrd could recall having ever seen a lonelier or barer place.

The only oddity they noticed at first were three holes in the snow a little to the south, each about as big as a hogshead but having the form of an equilateral triangle and apparently going down through the snow to the rock.

The Mouser squinted around closely, then shrugged. "But a pouch of stars could be a rather small thing, I suppose," he said. "While a heart of light—no guessing its size."

The whole summit was in bluish shadow except for the northernmost end and for a great pathway of golden light from the setting sun leading from the Needle's Eye all the way across the wind-leveled snow to the east rim.

DOWN the center of this sun-road went Kranarch's and Gnarfi's running footsteps, the snow flecked here and there with blood. Otherwise the snow ahead was printless. Fafhrd and the Mouser followed those tracks, walking east up their own long shadows.

"No sign of 'em ahead," the Mouser said. "Looks like there *is* some route down the east wall, and they've taken it—at least far enough to set another ambush."

As they neared the east rim, Fafhrd said, "I see other prints making north—a spearcast that way. Perhaps they turned."

"But where to?" the Mouser asked.

A few steps more and the mystery was solved horribly. They reached the end of the snow and there on the dark bloodied rock, hid until now by the wind-piled margin of the snow, sprawled the carcasses of Gnarfi and Kranarch, their middle clothes ripped away, their bodies obscenely mutilated.

Even as the Mouser's gorge rose, he remembered Keyaira's lightly-spoken words: "If you had won to Stardock's top, my father would have got your seed in quite a different fashion."

Shaking his head and glaring fiercely, Fafhrd walked around the bodies to the east rim and peered down.

He recoiled a step, then knelt and once more peered.

The Mouser's hopeful theory was prodigiously disproved. Never in his life had Fafhrd looked straight down half such a distance.

A few yards below, the east wall vanished inward. No telling how far the east rim jutted out

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from Stardock's heartrock.

From this point the fall was straight to the greenish gloom of the Great Rift Valley—five Lankhmar leagues, at least. Perhaps more.

He heard the Mouser say over his shoulder, "A path for birds or suicides. Naught else."

Suddenly the green below grew bright, though without showing the slightest feature except for a silvery hair, which might be a great river, running down its center. Looking up again, they saw that the sky had gone all golden with a mighty afterglow. They faced around and gasped in wonder.

The last sunrays coming through the Needle's Eye, swinging southward and a little up, glancingly illumined a transparent solid symmetric shape big as the biggest oak tree and resting exactly over the three triangular holes in the snow. It might only be described as a sharp-edged solid star of about eighteen points, resting by three of those on Stardock and built of purest diamond or some like substance.

Both had the same thought: that this must be a star the gods had failed to launch. The sunlight had touched the fire in its heart and made it shine, but for a moment only and feebly, not incandescently and forever, as it would have in the sky.

A PIERCINGLY shrill, silvery trumpet call broke the silence of the summit.

They swung their gaze north. Outlined by the same deep golden sunlight, ghostlier than the star, yet still clearly to be seen in some of its parts against the yellow sky, a slender tall castle lifted transparent walls and towers from the stony end of the summit. Its topmost spires seemed to go out of sight upward rather than end.

Another sound then—a wailing snarl. A pale animal bounded toward them across the snow from the northwest. Leaping aside with another snarl from the sprawled bodies, Hrissa rushed past them south with a third snarl tossed at them.

Almost too late they saw the peril against which she had tried to warn them.

Advancing toward them from west and north across the unmarked snow were a score of sets of footprints. There were no feet in those prints, nor bodies above them, yet they came on—right print, left print, appearing in succession—and ever more rapidly. And now they saw what they had missed at first because viewed end-on: above each paired set of prints a narrow-shafted, narrow-bladed spear, pointed straight toward them, coming on as swiftly as the prints.

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They ran south with Hrissa, Fafhrd in the lead. After a half dozen sprinting steps the Northerner heard a cry behind him. He stopped and then swiftly spun around.

The Mouser had slipped in the blood of their late foes and fallen. When he got to his feet, the gray spearpoints were around him on all sides save the rim. He made two wild defensive slashes with Scalpel, but the gray spearpoints came in relentlessly. Now they were in a close semicircle around him and hardly a span apart, and he was standing on the rim. They advanced another thrust and the Mouser perforce sprang back from them—and down he fell.

THERE was a rushing sound and chill air sluiced Fafhrd from behind and something sleekly hairy brushed his calves. As he braced himself to rush forward with his knife and slay an invisible or two for his friend, slender unseen arms clasped him from behind and he heard Hirriwi's silvery voice say in his ear, "Trust us," and a coppery-golden sister voice say, "We'll after him," and then he found himself pulled down onto a great invisible pulsing shaggy bed three spans above the snow, and they told him "Cling!" and he clung to the long thick unseen hair, and then suddenly the living bed shot forward across the snow and off the rim and there tilted vertically so his feet pointed at the sky and his face at the Great Rift Valley —and then the bed plunged straight down.

The thin air roared past and his beard and mane were whipped back by the speed of that plunge, but he tightened his grip on the handfuls of invisible hair and a slender arm pressed him down from either side, so that he felt through the fur the throbbing heartbeat of the great invisible carpetlike creature they rode. And he became aware that somehow Hrissa had got under his arm, for there was the small feline face beside his, with slitted eyes and with beard-tuft and ears blown back. And he felt the two invisible girls' bodies alongside his.

He realized that mortal eyes, could such have watched, would have seen only a large man clasping a large white cat and falling headfirst through empty space—but he would be falling much faster than any man should fall, even from such a vast height.

Beside him Hirriwi laughed, as if she had caught his thought, but then that laughter broke off sudden and the roaring of the wind died almost to utter silence. He guessed it was because the swiftly thickening air had deafened him.

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THE great dark cliffs flashing upward a dozen yards away were a blur. Yet below him the Great Rift Valley was still featureless green—no, the larger details were beginning to show now: forests and glades and curling hair-thin streams and little lakes like dewdrops.

Between him and the green below he saw a dark speck. It grew in size. It was the Mouser! —rather characteristically falling headfirst straight as an arrow with hands locked ahead of him and legs pressed together behind, probably in the faint hope that he might hit deep water.

The creature they rode matched the Mouser's speed and then gradually swung its plunge toward him, flattening out more and more from the vertical, so that the Mouser was pressed against them. Arms visible and invisible clasped him then, pulling him closer, so that all five of the plungers were crowded together on that one great sentient bed.

The creature's dive flattened still more then, halting its fall—there was a long moment while they were all pressed stomach-surgingly tight against the hairy back, while the trees still rushed up at them—and then they were coasting above those same treetops and spiraling down into a large glade.

What happened next to Fafhrd and the Mouser went all in a great tumbling rush, much too swiftly: the feel of springy turf under their feet and almost balmy air slucing their bodies, quick kisses exchanged, laughing, shouted congratulations that still sounded all muffled like ghost voices, something hard and irregular yet soft-covered pressed into the Mouser's hands, a last kiss—and then Hirriwi and Keyaira had broken away and a great sluice of air flattened the grass and the great invisible flier was gone and the girls with it.

They could watch its upward spiraling flight for a little, however, because Hrissa had gone away on it too. The ice-cat seemed to be peering down at them in farewell. Then she too vanished as the golden afterglow swiftly died in the darkening sky overhead.

THEY stood leaning together for support in the twilight. Then they straightened themselves, yawning prodigiously, and their hearing came back. They heard the gurgling of a brook and the twittering of birds and a small, faint rustle of dry leaves going away from them and the tiny buzz of a spiralling gnat.

The Mouser opened the invisible pouch in his hands.

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"The gems seem to be invisible too," he said, "though I can feel 'em well enough. We'll have a hard time selling them—unless we can find a blind jeweler."

The darkness deepened. Tiny cold fires began to glow in his palms: ruby, emerald, sapphire, amethyst, and pure white.

"No, by Issek!" the Gray Mouser said. "We'll only need sell them by night!—which is unquestionably the best time for trade in gems."

The new-risen moon, herself invisible beyond the lesser mountains walling the Rift Valley to the east, painted palely now the upper half of the great slender column of Stardock's east wall.

Gazing up at that queenly sight, Fafhrd said, "Gallant ladies, all four."

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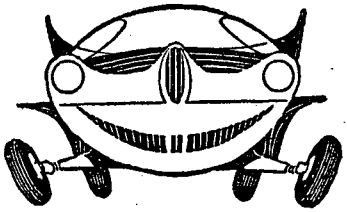

SALLY

BY ISAAC ASIMOV

Illustrator: EMSH

If the sign of a true science-fiction writer is his ability to extrapolate from present conditions some of the probabilities in our future, to glimpse tomorrow today, then the number of writers who qualify for the name dwindles considerably—to such major novelists as Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, to more recent writers like Robert A. Heinlein and Lester del Rey (see "Nerves," a remarkable story), and to Isaac Asimov, of course, whose best work, like vintage wine, tends to increase in value as the years pass. Just to mention I, Robot, *the* Foundation *series, and* Caves of Steel *is to make the point. And so does "Sally," a superb demonstration of Asimov's foresight and his warmth, in which the Good Doctor considers the problem of automotive congestion and highway safety; but where a lesser writer would end his story, Asimov keeps on writing and extrapolating—and that makes all the difference.*

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SALLY was coming down the lake road, so I waved to her and called her by name. I always liked to see Sally. I liked all of them, you understand, but Sally's the prettiest one of the lot. There just isn't any question about it.

She moved a little faster when I waved to her. Nothing undignified. She was never that. She moved just enough faster to show that she was glad to see me, too.

I turned to the man standing beside me. "That's Sally," I said.

He smiled at me and nodded.

Mrs. Hester had brought him in. She said, "This is Mr. Gellhorn, Jake. You remember he sent you the letter asking for an appointment."

That was just talk, really. I have a million things to do around the Farm, and one thing I just can't waste my time on is mail. That's why I have Mrs. Hester around. She lives pretty close by, she's good at attending to foolishness without running to me about it, and most of all, she likes Sally and the rest. Some people don't.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Gellhorn," I said.

"Raymond J. Gellhorn," he said, and gave me his hand, which I shook and gave back.

He was a largish fellow, half a head taller than I and wider, too. He was about half my age, thirtyish. He had black hair, plastered down slick, with a part in the middle, and a thin mustache, very neatly trimmed. His jawbones got big under his ears and made him look as if he had a slight case of mumps. On video he'd be a natural to play the villain, so I assumed he was a nice fellow. It goes to show that video can't be wrong all the time.

"I'm Jacob Folkers," I said. "What can I do for you?"

He grinned. It was a big, wide, white-toothed grin. "You can tell me a little about your Farm here, if you don't mind."

I heard Sally coming up behind me and I put out my hand. She slid right into it and the feel of the hard, glossy enamel of her fender was warm in my palm.

"A nice automatobile," said Gellhorn.

That's one way of putting it. Sally was a 2045 convertible with a Hennis-Carleton positronic motor and an Armat chassis. She had the cleanest, finest lines I've ever seen on any model, bar none. For five years, she'd been my favorite, and I'd put everything into her I could dream up. In all that time, there'd never been a human being behind her wheel.

Not once.

"Sally," I said, patting her gently, "meet Mr. Gellhorn."

Sally's cylinder-purr keyed up a little. I listened carefully for any knocking. Lately, I'd been

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hearing motor-knock in almost all the cars and changing the gasoline hadn't done a bit of good. Sally was as smooth as her paint job this time, however.

"Do you have names for all your cars?" asked Gellhorn.

He sounded amused, and Mrs. Hester doesn't like people to sound as though they were making fun of the Farm. She said, sharply, "Certainly. The cars have real personalities, don't they, Jake? The sedans are all males and the convertibles are females."

Gellhorn was smiling again. "And do you keep them in separate garages, ma'am?"

Mrs. Hester glared at him.

Gellhorn said to me, "And now I wonder if I can talk to you alone, Mr. Folkers?"

"That depends," I said. "Are you a reporter?"

"No, sir. I'm a sales agent. Any talk we have is not for publication. I assure you I am interested in strict privacy."

"Let's walk down the road a bit. There's a bench we can use."

We started down. Mrs. Hester walked away. Sally nudged along after us.

I said, "You don't mind if Sally comes along, do you?"

"Not at all. She can't repeat what we say, can she?" He laughed at his own joke, reached over and rubbed Sally's grille.

Sally raced her motor and Gellhorn's hand drew away quickly.

"She's not used to strangers," I explained.

WE sat down on the bench under the big oak tree where we could look across the small lake to the private speedway. It was the warm part of the day and the cars were out in force, at least thirty of them. Even at this distance I could see that Jeremiah was pulling his usual stunt of sneaking up behind some staid older model, then putting on a jerk of speed and yowling past with deliberately squealing brakes. Two weeks before he had crowded old Angus off the asphalt altogether, and I had turned off his motor for two days.

It didn't help though, I'm afraid, and it looks as though there's nothing to be done about it. Jeremiah is a sports model to begin with and that kind is awfully hot-headed.

"Well, Mr. Gellhorn," I said. "Could you tell me why you want the information?"

But he was just looking around. He said, "This *is* an amazing place, Mr. Folkers."

"I wish you'd call me Jake. Everyone does."

"All right, Jake. How many cars do you have here?"

"Fifty-one. We get one or two new ones every year. One year we got five. We haven't lost one yet.

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They're all in perfect running order. We even have a '15 model Mat-O-Mot in working order. One of the original automatics. It was the first car here."

Good old Matthew. He stayed in the garage most of the day now, but then he was the granddaddy of all positronic-motored cars. Those were the days when blind war veterans, paraplegics and heads of state were the only ones who drove automatics. But Samson Harridge was my boss and he was rich enough to be able to get one. I was his chauffeur at the time.

THE thought makes me feel old. I can remember when there wasn't an automobile in the world with brains enough to find its own way home. I chauffeured dead lumps of machines that needed a man's hand at their controls every minute. Every year machines like that used to kill tens of thousands of people.

The automatics fixed that. A positronic brain can react much faster than a human one, of course, and it paid people to keep hands off the controls. You got in, punched your destination and let it go its own way.

We take it for granted now, but I remember when the first laws came out forcing the old machines off the highways and limiting travel to automatics. Lord, what a fuzz. They called it everything from communism to fascism, but it emptied the highways and stopped the killing, and still more people get around more easily the new way.

Of course, the automatics were ten to a hundred times as expensive as the hand-driven ones, and there weren't many that could afford a private vehicle. The industry specialized in turning out omnibus-automatics. You could always call a company and have one stop at your door in a matter of minutes and take you where you wanted to go. Usually, you had to drive with others who were going your way, but what's wrong with that?

Samson Harridge had a private car though, and I went to him the minute it arrived. The car wasn't Matthew to me then. I didn't know it was going to be the dean of the Farm some day. I only knew it was taking my job away and I hated it.

I said, "You won't be needing me any more, Mr. Harridge?"

He was a pretty old man even then, with white hair and pink clean-shaven cheeks, almost like a little boy's. In those days, everyone knew what he looked like. He was one of the richest men in North America.

He said, "What are you dithering about, Jake? You don't think I'll trust myself to a contraption like that, do you? You stay right at the controls."

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I said, "But it works by itself, Mr. Harridge. It scans the road, reacts properly to obstacles, humans, and other cars, and remembers routes to travel."

"So they say. So they say. Just the same, you're sitting right behind the wheel in case anything goes wrong."

Funny how you can get to like a car. In no time I was calling it Matthew and was spending all my time keeping it polished and humming. A positronic brain stays in condition best when it's got control of its chassis at all times, which means it's worth keeping the gas tank filled so that the motor can turn over slowly day and night. After a while, it got so I could tell by the sound of the motor how Matthew felt.

In his own way, Harridge grew fond of Matthew, too. He had no one else to like. He'd divorced or outlived three wives and outlived five children and three grandchildren. So when he died, maybe it wasn't surprising that he had his estate converted into a Farm for Retired Automobiles, with me in charge and Matthew the first member of a distinguished line.

It's turned out to be my life. I never got married. You can't get married and still tend to automatics the way you should.

The newspapers thought it was funny, but after a while they stopped joking about it. Some things you can't joke about. Maybe you've never been able to afford an automatic and maybe you never will, either, but take it from me, you get to love them. They're hard-working and affectionate. It takes a man with no heart to mistreat one or to see one mistreated.

IT got so that after a man had an automatic for a while, he would make provisions for having it left to the Farm, if he didn't have an heir he could rely on to give it good care.

I explained that to Gellhorn.

He said, "Fifty-one cars! That represents a lot of money."

"Fifty thousand minimum per automatic, original investment," I said. "They're worth a lot more now. I've done things for them."

"It must take a lot of money to keep up the Farm."

"You're right there. The Farm's a non-profit organization, which gives us a break on taxes and, of course, new automatics that come in usually have trust funds attached. Still, costs are always going up. I have to keep the place landscaped; I keep laying down new asphalt and keeping the old in repair; there's gasoline, oil, repairs, and new gadgets. It adds up."

"And you've spent a long time at it."

"I sure have, Mr. Gellhorn. Thirty-three years."

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"You don't seem to be getting much out of it yourself."

"I don't? You surprise me, Mr. Gellhorn. I've got Sally and fifty others. Look at her."

I was grinning. I couldn't help it. Sally was so clean, it almost hurt. Some insect must have died on her windshield or one speck of dust too many had landed, so she was going to work. A little tube protruded and spurted Tergosol over the glass. It spread quickly over the silicone surface film and squeejees snapped into place instantly, passing over the windshield and forcing the water into the little channel that led it, dripping, down to the ground. Not a speck of water got onto her glistening apple-green hood. Squeejee and detergent tube snapped back into place and disappeared.

Gellhorn said, "I never saw an automatic do that."

"I guess not," I said. "I fixed that up specially on our cars. They're clean. They're always scrubbing their glass. They like it. I've even got Sally fixed up with wax jets. She polishes herself every night till you can see your face in any part of her and shave by it. If I can scrape up the money, I'd be putting it on the rest of the girls. Convertibles are very vain."

"I can tell you how to scrape up the money, if that interests you."

"That always does. How?"

"Isn't it obvious, Jake? Any of yours cars is worth fifty thousand minimum, you said. I'll bet most of them top six figures."

"So?"

"Ever think of selling a few?"

I shook my head. "You don't realize it, I guess, Mr. Gellhorn, but I can't sell any of these. They belong to the Farm, not to me."

"The money would go to the Farm."

"The incorporation papers of the Farm provide that the cars receive perpetual care. They can't be sold."

"What about the motors, then?"

"I don't understand you."

GELLHORN shifted position and his voice got confidential. "Look here, Jake, let me explain the situation. There's a big market for private automatics if they could only be made cheaply enough. Right?"

"That's no secret."

"And ninety-five per cent of the cost is the motor. Right? Now, I know where we can get a supply of bodies. I also know where we can sell automatics at a good price—twenty or thirty thousand for the cheaper models, maybe fifty or sixty for the better ones. All I need are the motors. You see the solution?"

"I don't, Mr. Gellhorn." I did, but I wanted him to spell it out.

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"It's right here. You've got fifty-one of them. You're an expert automatobile mechanic, Jake. You must be. You could unhook a motor and place it in another car so that no one would know the difference."

"It wouldn't be exactly ethical."

"You wouldn't be harming the cars. You'd be doing them a favor. Use your older cars. Use that old Mat-O-Mot."

"Well, now, wait a while, Mr. Gellhorn. The motors and bodies aren't two separate items. They're a single unit. Those motors are used to their own bodies. They wouldn't be happy in another car."

"All right, that's a point. That's a very good point, Jake. It would be like taking your mind and putting it in someone else's skull. Right? You don't think you would like that?"

"I don't think I would. No."

"But what if I took your mind and put it into the body of a young athlete. What about that, Jake? You're not a youngster anymore. If you had the chance, wouldn't you enjoy being twenty again? That's what I'm offering some of your positronic motors. They'll be put into new '57 bodies. The latest construction."

I laughed. "That doesn't make much sense, Mr. Gellhorn. Some of our cars may be old, but they're well-cared for. Nobody drives them. They're allowed their own way. They're *retired*, Mr. Gellhorn. I wouldn't want a twenty-year old body if it meant I had to dig ditches for the rest of my new life and never have enough to eat. . . . What do you think, Sally?"

Sally's two doors opened and then shut with a cushioned slam.

"What's that?" said Gellhorn.

"That's the way Sally laughs."

Gellhorn forced a smile. I guess he thought I was making a bad joke. He said, "Talk sense, Jake. Cars are *made* to be driven. They're probably not happy if you don't drive them."

I said, "Sally hasn't been driven in five years. She looks happy to me."

"I wonder."

He got up and walked toward Sally slowly. "Hi, Sally, how'd you like a drive?"

Sally's motor revved up. She backed away.

"Don't push her, Mr. Gellhorn," I said. "She's liable to be a little skittish."

Two sedans were about a hundred yards up the road. They had stopped. Maybe, in their own way, they were watching. I didn't bother about them. I had my eyes on Sally, and I kept them there.

Gellhorn said, "Steady now, Sally." He lunged out and seized the door handle. It didn't budge, of course.

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He said, "It opened a minute ago."

I said, "Automatic lock. She's got a sense of privacy, Sally has."

He let go, then said, slowly and deliberately, "A car with a sense of privacy shouldn't go around with its top down."

He stepped back three or four paces, then quickly, so quickly I couldn't take a step to stop him, he ran forward and vaulted into the car. He caught Sally completely by surprise, because as he came down, he shut off the ignition before she could lock it in place.

FOR the first time in five years, Sally's motor was dead.

I think I yelled, but Gellhorn had the switch on "Manual" and locked that in place, too. He kicked the motor into action. Sally was alive again but she had no freedom of action.

He started up the road. The sedans were still there. They turned and drifted away, not very quickly. I suppose it was all a puzzle to them.

One was Giuseppe, from the Milan factories, and the other was Stephen. They were always together. They were both new at the Farm, but they'd been here long enough to know that our cars just didn't have drivers.

Gellhorn went straight on, and when the sedans finally got it through their heads that Sally wasn't going to slow down, that she *couldn't* slow down, it was too late for anything but desperate measures.

They broke for it, one to each side, and Sally raced between them like a streak. Steve crashed through the lakeside fence and rolled to a halt on the grass and mud not six inches from the water's edge. Giuseppe bumped along the land side of the road to a shaken halt.

I had Steve back on the highway and was trying to find out what harm, if any, the fence had done him, when Gellhorn came back.

Gellhorn opened Sally's door and stepped out. Leaning back, he shut off the ignition a second time.

"There," he said. "I think I did her a lot of good."

I held my temper. "Why did you dash through the sedans? There was no reason for that."

"I kept expecting them to turn out."

"They did. One went through a fence."

"I'm sorry, Jake," he said. "I thought they'd move more quickly. You know how it is. I've been in lots of buses, but I've only been in a private automatic two or three times in my life, and this is the first time I ever drove one. That just shows you, Jake. It got me, driving one, and I'm pretty

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hard-boiled. I tell you, we don't have to go more than twenty per cent below list price to reach a good market, and it would be ninety per cent profit."

"Which we would split?"

"Fifty-fifty. And I take all the risks, remember."

"All right. I listened to you. Now you listen to me." I raised my voice because I was just too mad to be polite anymore. "When you turn off Sally's motor, you hurt her. How would you like to be kicked unconscious? That's what you do to Sally, when you turn her off."

"You're exaggerating, Jake. The automatobusses get turned off every night."

"Sure, that's why I want none of my boys or girls in your fancy '57 bodies, where I won't know what treatment they'll get. Busses need major repairs in their positronic circuits every couple of years. Old Matthew hasn't had his circuits touched in twenty years. What can you offer him compared with that?"

"Well, you're excited now. Suppose you think over my proposition when you've cooled down and get in touch with me."

"I've thought it over all I want to. If I ever see you again, I'll call the police."

His mouth got hard and ugly. He said, "Just a minute, old-timer."

I said, "Just a minute, you. This is private property and I'm ordering you off."

He shrugged. "Well, then, goodbye."

I said, "Mrs. Hester will see you off the property. Make that goodbye permanent."

BUT it wasn't permanent. I saw him again two days later. Two and a half days, rather, because it was about noon when I saw him first and a little after midnight when I saw him again.

I sat up in bed when he turned the light on, blinking blindly till I made out what was happening. Once I could see, it didn't take much explaining. In fact, it took none at all. He had a gun in his right fist, the nasty little needle barrel just visible between two fingers. I knew that all he had to do was to increase the pressure of his hand and I would be torn apart.

He said, "Put on your clothes, Jake."

I didn't move. I just watched him.

He said, "Look, Jake, I know the situation. I visited you two days ago, remember. You have no guards on this place, no electrified fences, no warning signals. Nothing."

I said, "I don't need any. Meanwhile there's nothing to stop you from leaving, Mr. Gellhorn. I would if I were you. This place can be very dangerous."

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He laughed a little. "It is, for anyone on the wrong side of a fist gun."

"I see it," I said. "I know you've got one."

"Then get a move on. My men are waiting."

"No, sir, Mr. Gellhorn. Not unless you tell me what you want, and probably not then."

"I made you a proposition day before yesterday."

"The answer's still no."

"There's more to the proposition now. I've come here with some men and an automatobus. You have your chance to come with me and disconnect twenty-five of the positronic motors. I don't care which twenty-five you choose. We'll load them on the bus and take them away. Once they're disposed of, I'll see to it that you get your fair share of the money."

"I have your word on that, I suppose."

He didn't act as if he thought I was being sarcastic. He said, "You have."

I said, "No."

"If you insist on saying no, we'll go about it in our own way. I'll disconnect the motors myself, only I'll disconnect all fifty-one. Every one of them."

"It isn't easy to disconnect positronic motors, Mr. Gellhorn. Are you a robotics expert? Even if you are, you know, these motors have been modified by me."

"I know that, Jake. And to be truthful, I'm not an expert. I may ruin quite a few motors trying to get them out. That's why I'll have to work over all fifty-one if you don't cooperate. You see, I may only end up with twenty-five when I'm through. The first few I'll tackle will probably suffer the most. Till I get the hang of it, you see. And if I go it myself, I think I'll put Sally first in line."

I said, "I can't believe you're serious, Mr. Gellhorn."

He said, "I'm serious, Jake." He let it all dribble in. "If you want to help, you can keep Sally. Otherwise, she's liable to be hurt very badly. Sorry." He blew at his fist in an unconcerned gesture, as though to clear the tiny orifice of the needle gun. I would have cheered if it had gone off and left him faceless. I try to think the best of any man, but a two-legged animal who would think of treating cars in such a way has no right to the title Man.

I said, "I'll come with you, but I'll give you one more warning. You'll be in trouble, Mr. Gellhorn."

He thought that was very funny. He was laughing very quietly as we went down the stairs together.

THERE was an automatobus waiting outside the driveway to the garage apartments. The shadows of three men waited be-

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side it, and their flash beams went on as we approached. In the light I could see the bus rather well. It wasn't an old model, but it was rather beat up, as though its owners considered it nothing but a lump of machinery. Still, I somehow got the impression that it had personality. You may have noticed that look of defensive self-respect hard-used buses get when they grow old before their time. Some of them, anyway. Like old men with gray hair but straight backs. I like to think that's the impression I give.

Gellhorn said in a low voice, "I've got the old fellow. Come on. Move the truck up the drive and let's get started."

One of the others leaned in and punched the proper instructions on the control panel. We moved up the driveway with the bus following submissively.

"It won't go inside the garage," I said. "The door won't take it. We don't have buses here. Only private cars."

"All right," said Gellhorn. "Pull it over onto the grass and keep it out of sight."

I could here the thrumming of the cars when we were still ten yards from the garage. They got noisy sometimes, especially on a fine moonlit night, when any well-tanked, well-greased car would enjoy a quick trip on the speedway by moonshine. Once in a while I'd hand out permission to a few as a reward for good behavior, but not often. As a general rule. it was risky. The estate was a large one, but at night it was easv for a high-spirited car to get "lost." I didn't want one to wander into town and start trouble among any busybodies about allowing fifty-one cars to roll about driverless.

Usually they quieted down if I entered the garage. This time they didn't. I think they knew that strangers were about, and once the faces of Gellhorn and the others were visible they got noisier. Each motor was a warm rumble, and each motor was knocking irregularly until the place rattled.

THE lights went up automatically as we stepped inside. Gellhorn didn't seem bothered by the car noise, but the three men with him looked surprised and uncomfortable. They had the look of the hired thug about them, a look that was not compounded of physical features so much as of a certain wariness of eye and hang-dogness of face. I knew the type and I wasn't worried.

One of them said, "Damn it, they're burning gas."

"My cars always do," I replied stiffly.

"Not tonight," said Gellhorn. "Turn them off."

"It's not that easy, Mr. Gellhorn," I said.

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"Get started!" he said.

I stood there. He had his fist gun pointed at me steadily. I said, "I told you, Mr. Gellhorn, that my cars have been well-treated while they've been at the Farm. They're used to being treated that way, and they resent anything else."

"You have one minute," he said. "Lecture me some other time."

"I'm trying to explain something. I'm trying to explain that my cars can understand what I say to them. A positronic motor will learn to do that with time and patience. My cars have learned. Sally understood your proposition two days ago. You'll remember she laughed when I asked her opinion. She also knows what you did to her and so do the two sedans you scattered. And the rest know what to do about trespassers in general."

"Look, you crazy old fool—"

"All I have to say is—" I raised my voice. "Get them!"

One of the men turned pasty and yelled, but his voice was drowned completely in the sound of fifty-one horns turned loose at once. They held their notes, and within the four walls of the garage the echoes rose to a wild, metallic call. Two cars rolled forward, not hurriedly, but with no possible mistake as to their target. Two cars fell in line behind the first two. All the cars were stirring in their separate stalls.

The thugs stared, then backed.

I shouted, "Don't get up against a wall."

Apparently, they had that instinctive thought themselves. They rushed madly for the door of the garage.

At the door one of Gellhorn's men turned, brought up a fist gun of his own. The needle pellet tore a thin, blue flash toward the first car. The car was Giuseppe.

A thin line of paint peeled up Guiseppe's hood, and the right half of his windshield crazed and splintered but did not break through.

THE men were out the door, running, and two by two the cars crunched out after them into the night, their horns calling the charge.

I kept my hand on Gellhorn's elbow, but I don't think he could have moved in any case. His lips were trembling.

I said, "That's why I don't need electrified fences or guards. My property protects itself."

Gellhorn's eyes swiveled back and forth in fascination as, pair by pair, they whizzed by. He said, "They're killers!"

"Don't be silly. They won't kill your men."

"They're killers!"

"They'll just give your men a lesson. My cars have been specially trained for cross-country

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pursuit for just such an occasion; I think what your men will get will be worse than an outright quick kill. Have you ever been chased by an automatobile?"

Gellhorn didn't answer.

I went on. I didn't want him to miss a thing. "They'll be shadows going no faster than your men, chasing them here, blocking them there, blaring at them, dashing at them, missing with a screech of brake and a thunder of motor. They'll keep it up till your men drop, out of breath and half-dead, waiting for the wheels to crunch over their breaking bones. The cars won't do that. They'll turn away. You can bet, though, that your men will never return here in their lives. Not for all the money you or ten like you could give them. Listen—"

I tightened my hold on his elbow. He strained to hear.

I said, "Don't you hear car doors slamming?"

It was faint and distant, but unmistakable.

He said, "Yes."

I said, "They're laughing. They're enjoying themselves."

His face crumpled with rage. He lifted his hand. He was still holding his fist gun.

I said, "I wouldn't. One automatocar is still with us."

I don't think he had noticed Sally till then. She had moved up so quietly. Though her right front fender nearly touched me, I couldn't hear her motor. She might have been holding her breath.

Gellhorn yelled.

I SAID, "She won't touch you, as long as I'm with you. But if you kill me . . . . You know, Sally doesn't like you."

Gellhorn turned the gun in Sally's direction.

"Her motor is shielded," I said, "and before you could ever squeeze the gun a second time she would be on top of you."

"All right, then," he yelled, and suddenly my arm was bent behind my back and twisted so I could hardly stand. He held me between Sally and himself, and his pressure didn't let up. "Back out with me and don't try to break loose, old-timer, or I'll tear your arm out of its socket."

I had to move. Sally nudged along with us, worried, uncertain what to do. I tried to say something to her and couldn't. I could only clench my teeth and moan.

Gellhorn's automatobus was still standing outside the garage. I was forced in. Gellhorn jumped in after me, locking the doors.

His forehead glistened momentarily, just before the white light pouring out of the garage doors dimmed. His breath frictioned through his nostrils, and he mopped at his face.

He said, "All right, now. We'll talk sense."

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I WAS rubbing my arm, trying to get life back into it, and even as I did I was automatically and without any conscious effort studying the control board of the bus.

I said, "This is a rebuilt job."

"So?" he said caustically. "It's a sample of my work. I picked up a discarded chassis, found a brain I could use and spliced me a private bus. What of it?"

I tore at the repair panel, forcing it aside.

He said, "What the hell. Get away from that." The side of his palm came down numbingly on my left shoulder.

I struggled with him. "I don't want to do this bus any harm. What kind of a person do you think I am? I just want to take a look at some of the motor connections."

It didn't take much of a look. I was boiling when I turned to him. I said, "You're a hound and a bastard. You had no right installing this motor yourself. Why didn't you get a robotics man?"

He said, "Do I look crazy?"

"Even if it was a stolen motor, you had no right to treat it so. I wouldn't treat a man the way you treated that motor. Solder, tape, and pinch clamps! It's brutal!"

"It works, doesn't it?"

"Sure it works, but it must be hell for the bus. You could live with migraine headaches and acute arthritis, but it wouldn't be much of a life. This car is *suffering*."

"Shut up!" For a moment he glanced out the window at Sally, who had rolled up as close to the bus as she could. He made sure the doors and windows were locked.

He said. "We're getting out of here now, before the other cars come back. We'll stay away."

"How will that help you?"

"Your cars will run out of gas someday, won't they? You haven't got them fixed up so they can tank up on their own, have you? We'll come back and finish the job."

"They'll be looking for me," I said. "Mrs. Hester will call the police."

He was past reasoning with. He just punched the bus in gear. It lurched forward. Sally followed.

He giggled. "What can she do if you're here with me?"

Sally seemed to realize that, too. She picked up speed, passed us and was gone. Gellhorn opened the window next to him and spat through the opening.

The bus lumbered on over the dark road, its motor rattling unevenly. Gellhorn dimmed the periphery light until the phosphorescent green stripe down the middle of the highway, sparkling in the moonlight, was all that kept us out of the trees. There was virtually no traffic. Two cars

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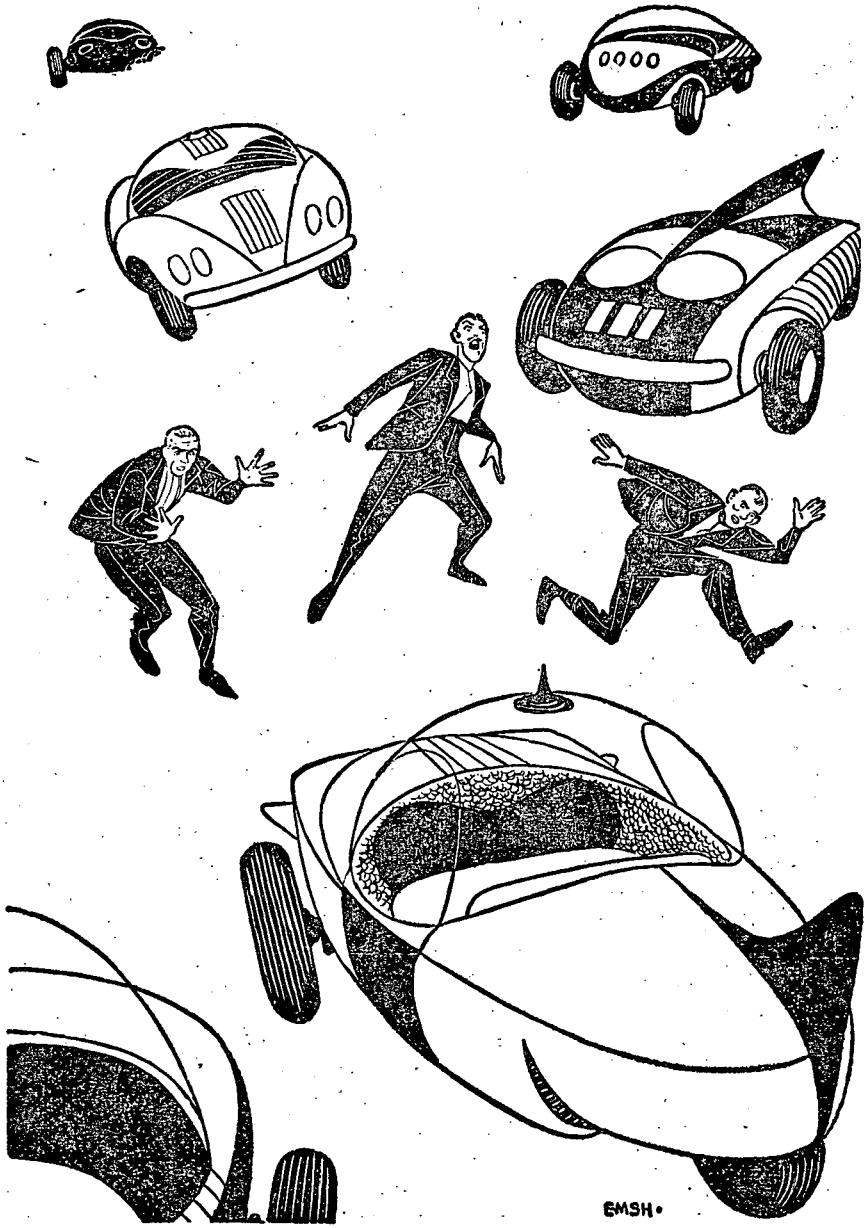

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passed ours, going the other way, and there was none at all on our side of the highway, either before or behind.

I HEARD the door-slamming first. Quick and sharp in the silence, first on the right and then on the left. Gellhorn's hands quivered as he punched savagely for increased speed. A beam of light shot out from among a scrub of trees, blinding us. Another beam plunged at us from behind the guard rails on the other side. At a crossover, four hundred yards ahead, there was a sque-e-e-e-e as a car darted across our path.

"Sally went for the rest," I said. "You're surrounded."

"So what? What can they do?"

He hunched over the controls, peering through the windshield.

"And don't *you* try anything, old-timer," he muttered.

I couldn't. I was bone-weary; my left arm was on fire. The motor sounds gathered and grew closer. I could hear the motors missing in odd patterns; suddenly it seemed to me that my cars were speaking to one another.

A medley of horns came from behind. I turned and Gellhorn looked quickly into the rear-view mirror. A dozen cars were following in both lanes.

Gellhorn yelled and laughed madly.

I cried, "Stop! Stop the car!"

Because not a quarter of a mile ahead, plainly visible in the light beams of two sedans on the roadside was Sally, her trim body plunked square across the road. Two cars shot into the opposite lane to our left, keeping perfect time with us and preventing Gellhorn from turning out.

But he had no intention of turning out. He put his finger on the full-speed-ahead button and kept it there.

He said, "There'll be no bluffing here. This bus outweighs her five to one, old-timer, and we'll just push her off the road like a dead kitten."

I knew he could. The bus was on manual and his finger was on the button. I knew he would.

I lowered the window and stuck my head out. "Sally," I screamed. "Get out of the way. *Sally!*"

It was drowned out in the agonized squeal of maltreated brakebands. I felt myself thrown forward and heard Gellhorn's breath puff out of his body.

I said, "What happened?" It was a foolish question. We had stopped. That was what had happened. Sally and the bus were five feet apart. With five times her weight tearing down on her, she had not budged. The guts of her.

Gellhorn yanked at the Manual toggle switch. "It's got to," he kept muttering. "It's got to."

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I said, "Not the way you hooked up the motor, expert. Any of the circuits could cross over."

He looked at me with a tearing anger and growled deep in his throat. His hair was matted over his forehead. He lifted his fist.

"That's all the advice out of you there'll ever be, old-timer."

And I knew the needle gun was about to fire.

I pressed back against the bus door, watching the fist come up, and when the door opened I went over backward and out, hitting the ground with a thud. I heard the door slam closed again.

I got to my knees and looked up in time to see Gellhorn struggle uselessly with the closing window, then aim his fist quickly through the glass. He never fired. The bus got under way with a tremendous roar, and Gellhorn lurched backward.

Sally wasn't in the way any longer, and I watched the bus's rear lights flicker away down the highway.

I was exhausted. I sat down right there, right on the highway, and put my head down in my crossed arms, trying to catch my breath.

I heard a car stop gently at my side. When I looked up, it was Sally. Slowly—lovingly, you might say—her front door opened.

No one had driven Sally for five years—except Gellhorn, of course—and I know how valuable such freedom was to a car. I appreciated the gesture, but I said, "Thanks, Sally, but I'll take one of the newer cars."

I got up and turned away, but skillfully and neatly as a pirouette, she wheeled before me again. I couldn't hurt her feelings. I got in. Her front seat had the fine, fresh scent of an automatobile that kept itself spotlessly clean. I lay down across it, thankfully, and with even, silent, and rapid efficiency, my boys and girls brought me home.

MRS. HESTER brought me the copy of the radio transcript the next evening with great excitement.

"It's Mr. Gellhorn," she said. "The man who came to see you."

"What about him?"

I dreaded her answer.

"They found him dead," she said. "Imagine that. Just lying dead in a ditch."

"It might be a stranger altogether," I mumbled.

"Raymond J. Gellhorn," she said, sharply. "There can't be two, can there? The description fits, too. Lord, what a way to die? They found tire marks on his arms and body. Imagine! I'm glad it turned out to be a bus; otherwise they might have come poking around here."

"Did it happen near here?" I asked, anxiously.

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"No . . . Near Cooksville. But, goodness, read about it yourself if you—What happened to Giuseppe?"

I welcomed the diversion. Giuseppe was waiting patiently for me to complete the repaint job. His windshield had been replaced.

I said, "Jeremiah! You know."

"Has he been stunting on the speedway again? Why don't you talk to him."

"I have. It doesn't do any good."

After she left, I snatched up the transcript. There was no doubt about it. The doctor reported he had been running and was in a state of totally spent exhaustion. I wondered for how many miles the bus had played with him before the final lunge. The transcript had no notion of anything like that, of course.

They had located the bus and identified it by the tire tracks. The police had it and were trying to trace its ownership.

There was an editorial in the transcript about it. It had been the first traffic fatality in the state for that year and the paper warned strenuously against manual driving after night.

There was no mention of Gellhorn's three thugs and for that, at least, I was grateful. None of our cars had been seduced by the pleasure of the chase into killing.

That was all. I let the paper drop. Gellhorn had been a criminal. His treatment of the bus had been brutal. There was no question in my mind he deserved death. But still I felt a bit queasy over the manner of it.

A MONTH has passed now and I can't get it out of my mind.

My cars talk to one another. I have no doubt about it anymore. It's as though they've gained confidence; as though they're not bothering to keep it secret anymore. Their engines rattle and knock continuously.

And they don't talk among themselves only. They talk to the cars and buses that come into the Farm on business. How long have they been doing that?

They must be understood, too. Gellhorn's bus understood them, for all it hadn't been on the grounds more than an hour. I can close my eyes and bring back that dash along the highway, with our cars flanking the bus on either side, clacking their motors at it till it understood, stopped, let me out, and ran off with Gellhorn.

Did my cars tell him to kill Gellhorn? Or was that his idea?

Can cars have such ideas? The motor designers say no. But they mean under ordinary conditions. Have they foreseen *everything?*

Cars get ill-used, you know.

Some of them enter the Farm and observe. They get told

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things. They find out that cars exist whose motors are never stopped, whom no one ever drives, whose every need is supplied.

Then maybe they go out and tell others. Maybe the word is spreading quickly. Maybe they're going to think that the Farm way should be the way all over the world. They don't understand. You couldn't expect them to understand about legacies and the whims of rich men.

There are millions of automatobiles on Earth, tens of millions. If the thought gets rooted in them that they're slaves; that they should do something about it. . . . If they begin to think the way Gelhorn's bus did . . .

Maybe it won't be till after my time. And then they'll have to keep a few of us to take care of them, won't they? They wouldn't kill us all.

And maybe they would. Maybe they wouldn't understand about how someone would have to care for them. Maybe they won't wait.

Every morning I wake up and think, Maybe today. . . .

I don't get as much pleasure out of my cars as I used to. Lately, I notice that I'm even beginning to avoid Sally.

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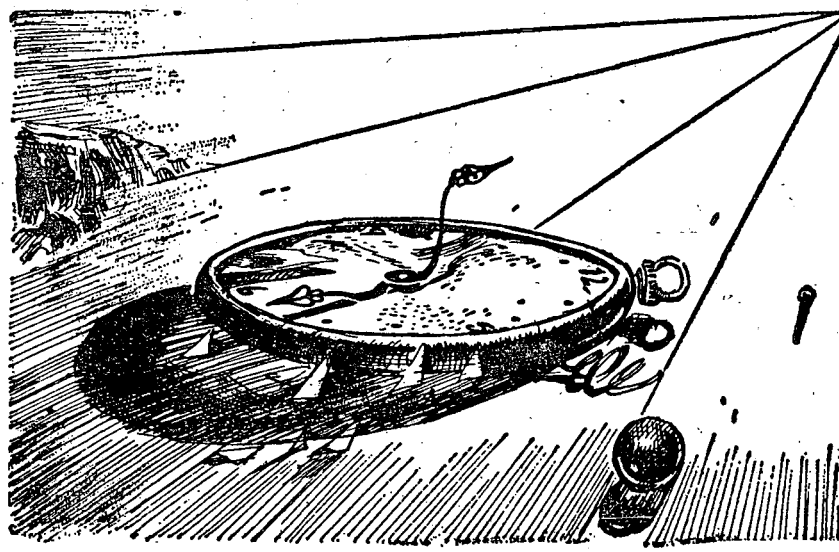
In *New Maps of Hell* (that astute critical dissection of modern science fiction), Kingsley Amis, the outspoken English novelist, a longtime reader of the genre, calls attention to what he takes to be "Simak's syndrome," a strong bucolic strain seen in a good number of his better stories, particularly in such classic works as "The Big Front Yard," "A Death in the House," and *City*, of course. There is much to be said for this view. In fact, so persistent can this longing for rural paradise be that sometimes when a Simak story is set on another planet, light-years away across the Galaxy, that world is far more idyllic than ours, but sometimes it's more deadly, as in the story you are about to read—in which Man arrives with his expertise, his army of glistening robots, his doubts about this green new world. Then those suspicions are suddenly and stunningly confirmed when an unarmed alien walks calmly out of the jungle and quietly informs him that . . .



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"YOU'LL NEVER GO HOME AGAIN"

Illustrated by SOMMERS

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

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THERE was nothing, absolutely nothing, that could stop a human planetary survey party. It was a specialized unit created for and charged with one purpose only—to establish a bridgehead on an alien planet, to blast out the perimeters of that bridgehead and establish a base where there would be some elbow-room. Then hold that elbow-room against all comers until it was time to go.

After the base was once established, the brains of the party got to work. They turned the place inside out. They put it on tape and captured it within the chains of symbols they scribbled in their field books. They pictured it and wrote it and plotted it and reduced it to a neat assembly of keyed and symbolic facts to be inserted in the galactic files.

If there was life, and sometimes there was, they prodded it to get reaction. Sometimes the reaction was extremely violent, and other times it was much more dangerously subtle. But there were ways in which to handle both the violent and the subtle, for the legionnaires and their robotics were trained to a razor's edge and knew nearly all the answers.

There was nothing in the galaxy, so far known, that could stop a human survey party.

Tom Decker sat at ease in the empty lounge and swirled the ice in the highball glass, well contented, watching the first of the robots emerge from the bowels of the cargo space. They dragged a conveyor belt behind them as they emerged and Decker, sitting idly, watched them drive supports into the ground and rig up the belt.

A door clicked open back of Decker and he turned his head.

"May I come in, sir?" Doug Jackson asked.

"Certainly," said Decker.

Jackson walked to the great curving window and looked out. "What does it look like, sir?" he asked.

Decker shrugged. "Another job," he said. "Six weeks. Six months. Depends on what we find."

Jackson sat down beside him. "This one looks tough," he said. "Jungle worlds always are a bit meaner than any of the others."

Decker grunted at him. "A job. That's all. Another job to do. Another report to file. Then they'll either send out an exploitation gang or a pitiful bunch of bleating colonists."

"Or," said Jackson, "they'll file the report and let it gather dust for a thousand years or so."

"They can do anything they want," Decker told him. "We turn it in. What someone else does with it after that is their affair, not ours!"

They sat quietly watching the

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six robots roll out the first of the packing cases, rip off its cover and unpack the seventh robot, laying out his various parts neatly in a row in the tramped-down, waist-high grass. Then, working as a team, with not a single fumble, they put No. 7 together, screwed his brain case into his metal skull, flipped up his energizing switch and slapped the breastplate home.

No. 7 stood groggily for a moment. He swung his arms uncertainly, shook his head from side to side. Then, having oriented himself, he stepped briskly forward, helped the other six heave the packing box containing No. 8 off the conveyor belt.

"Takes a little time this way," said Decker, "but it saves a lot of space. Have to cut our robot crew in half if we didn't pack them at the end of every job. They stow away better."

He sipped at his highball speculatively. Jackson lit a cigarette.

"Someday," said Jackson, "we're going to run up against something that we can't handle."

Decker snorted.

"Maybe here," insisted Jackson, gesturing at the nightmare jungle world outside the great curved sweep of the vision plate.

"You're a romanticist," Decker told him shortly. "In love with the unexpected. Besides, you're new. After a dozen trips you won't feel this way."

"It could happen," insisted Jackson.

Decker nodded, almost sleepily. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe it could, at that. It never has, but I suppose it could. And when it does, we take it on the lam. It's no part of our job to fight a last ditch battle. When we bump up against something that's too big to handle, we don't stick around. We don't take any risks."

He took another sip.

"Not even calculated risks," he added.

THE ship rested on the top of a low hill, in a small clearing masked by tall grass; sprinkled here and there with patches of exotic flowers. Below the hill a river flowed sluggishly, a broad expanse of chocolate-colored water moving in a sleepy tide through the immense vine-entangled forest.

As far as the eye could see, the jungle stretched away, a brooding darkness that even from behind the curving quartz of the vision plate seemed to exude a heady, musty scent of danger that swept up over the grass-covered hilltop. There was no sign of life, but one knew, almost instinctively, that sentiency lurked in the buried pathways and tunnels of the great tree-land.

Robot No. 8 had been energized and now the eight split into two groups, ran out two packing

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cases at a time instead of one. Soon there were twelve robots and then they formed themselves into three working groups.

"Like that," said Decker, picking up the conversation where they had left it lying. He gestured with his glass, now empty. "No calculated risks. We send the robots first. They unpack and set up their fellows. Then the whole gang turns to and uncrates the machinery and sets it up and gets it operating. A man doesn't even put his foot on the ground until he has a steel ring around the ship to give him protection."

Jackson sighed. "I guess you're right," he said. "Nothing can happen. We don't take any chances. Not a single one."

"Why should we?" Decker asked. He heaved himself out of the chair, stood up and stretched. "Got a thing or two to do," he said. "Last minute checks and so on."

"I'll sit here for a while," said Jackson. "I like to watch. It's all new to me."

"You'll get over it," Decker told him. "In another twenty years."

IN his office, Decker lifted a sheaf of preliminary reports off his desk and ran through them slowly, checking each one carefully, filing away in his mind the basic facts of the world outside.

He worked stolidly, wetting a big, blunt thumb against his outthrust tongue to flip the report pages off the top of the next stack and deposit them, in not so neat a pile to his right, face downward.

Atmosphere—Pressure slightly more than Earth. High in oxygen.

Gravity—A bit more than Earth.

Temperature—Hot. Jungle worlds always were. There was a breeze outside now, he thought. Maybe there'd be a breeze most of the time. That would be a help.

Rotation—Thirty-six hour day.

Radiation—None of local origin, but some hard stuff getting through from the sun.

He made a mental note: Watch that.

Bacterial and virus count—As usual. Lots of it. Apparently not too dangerous. Not with every single soul hypoed and immunized and hormoned to his eyebrows. But you never can be sure, he thought. Not entirely sure. No calculated risks, he had told Jackson. But here was a calculated risk and one you couldn't do a single thing about. If there was a bug that picked you for a host and you weren't loaded for bear to fight him, you took him on and did the best you could.

Life factor—Lot of emanation. Probably the vegetation, maybe even the soil, was crawling with

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all sorts of loathsome life. Vicious stuff, most likely, but that was something you took care of as a matter of routine. No use taking any chances. You went over the ground even if there was no life—just to be sure there wasn't.

A tap came on the door and he called out for the man to enter.

It was Captain Carr, commander of the Legion unit.

Carr saluted snappily. Decker did not rise, made his answering salute a sloppy one on purpose. No use, he told himself, letting the fellow establish any semblance of equality, for there was no such equality in fact. A captain of the Legion simply did not rank with the commandant of a galactic survey party.

"Reporting, sir," said Carr. "We are ready for a landing."

"Fine, Captain. Fine."

What was the matter with the fool? The Legion always was ready, always would be ready—that was no more than tradition. Why, then, carry out such an empty, stiff formality?

But it was the nature of a man like Carr, he supposed. The Legion, with its rigid discipline, its ancient pride of service and tradition, attracted men like Carr, was a perfect finishing school for accomplished martinets.

TIN soldiers, Decker thought, but accomplished ones. As hard-bitten a gang of fighting men as the galaxy had ever known. They were drilled and disciplined to a razor's edge, serum- and hormone-injected against all known diseases of an alien world, trained and educated in alien psychology and strictly indoctrinated with high survival characteristics which stood up under even the most adverse circumstances.

"We shall not be ready for some time, Captain," Decker said. "The robots have just started their uncrating."

"Very well," said Carr. "We await your orders, sir."

"Thank you, Captain," Decker told him, making it quite clear that he wished he would get out. But when Carr turned to go, Decker called him back.

"What is it, sir?" asked Carr.

"I've been wondering," said Decker. "Just wondering, you understand. Can you imagine any circumstance which might arise that the Legion could not handle?"

Carr's expression was a pure delight to see. "I'm afraid, sir, that I don't understand your question."

Decker sighed. "I didn't think you would," he said.

Before nightfall, the full working force of robots had been uncrated and had set up some of the machines, enough to establish a small circle of alarm posts around the ship.

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A flame thrower burned a barren circle on the hilltop, stretching five hundred feet around the ship. A hard radiations generator took up its painstaking task, pouring pure death into the soil. The toll must have been terrific. In some spots the ground virtually boiled as the dying life forms fought momentarily and fruitlessly to escape the death that cut them down.

The robots rigged up huge batteries of lamps that set the hilltop ablaze with a light as bright as day, and the work went on.

As yet, no human had set foot outside the ship.

Inside the ship, the robot stewards set up a table in the lounge so that the human diners might see what was going on outside the ship.

The entire company, except for the legionnaires who stayed in quarters, had gathered for the meal when Decker came into the room.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said.

He strode to the table's head and the others ranged themselves along the sides. He sat down and there was a scraping of drawn chairs as the others took their places.

He clasped his hands in front of him and bowed his head and parted his lips to say the customary words. He halted even as he was about to speak, and when the words did come they were different from the ones he had said by rote a thousand times before.

"Dear Father, we are Thy servants in an unknown land and there is a deadly pride upon us. Teach us humility and lead us to the knowledge, before it is too late, that men, despite their far traveling and their mighty works, still are as children in Thy sight. Bless the bread we are about to break, we beg Thee, and keep us forever in Thy compassion. Amen."

He lifted his head and looked down the table. Some of them, he saw, were startled. The others were amused.

THEY wonder if I'm cracking, he thought. They think the Old Man is breaking up. And that may be true, for all I know. Although I was all right until this afternoon. All right until young Doug Jackson . . . .

"Those were fine words, lad," said Old MacDonald, the chief engineer. "I thank you for them, sir, and there is them among us who would do well to take some heed upon them."

Platters and plates were being passed up and down the table's length and there was the commonplace, homely clatter of silverware and china.

"This looks an interesting

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world," said Waldron, the anthropologist. "Dickson and I were up in observation just before the sun set. We thought we saw something down by the river. Some sort of life."

Decker grunted, scooping fried potatoes out of a bowl onto his plate. "Funny if we don't run across a lot of life here. The radiation wagon stirred up a lot of it when it went over the field today."

"What Waldron and I saw," said Dickson, "looked humanoid."

Decker squinted at the biologist. "Sure of that?" he asked.

Dickson shook his head. "The seeing was poor. Couldn't be absolutely sure. Seemed to me there were two or three of them. Matchstick men."

Waldron nodded. "Like a picture a kid would draw," he said. "One stroke for the body. Two strokes each for arms and legs. A circle for a head. Angular. Ungraceful. Skinny."

"Graceful enough in motion, though," said Dickson. "When they moved, they went like cats. Flowed, sort of."

"We'll know plenty soon enough," Decker told them mildly. "In a day or two we'll flush them."

FUNNY, he thought. On almost every job someone popped up to report he had spotted humanoids. Usually there weren't any. Usually it was just imagination. Probably wishful thinking, he told himself, the yen of men far away from their fellow men to find in an alien place a type of life that somehow seemed familiar.

Although the usual humanoid, once you met him in the flesh, turned out to be so repulsively alien that alongside him an octopus would seem positively human.

Franey, the senior geologist, said, "I've been thinking about those mountains to the west of us, the ones we caught sight of when we were coming in. Had a new look about them. New mountains are good to work in. They haven't worn down. Easier to get at whatever's in them."

"We'll lay out our first survey lines in that direction," Decker told him.

Outside the curving vision plate, the night was alive with the blaze of the batteries of lights. Gleaming robots toiled in shining gangs. Ponderous machines lumbered past. Smaller ones scurried like frightened beetles. To the south, great gouts of flame leaped out, and the sky was painted red with the bursts of a squad of flame throwers going into action.

"Chewing out a landing field," said Decker. "A tongue of jungle juts out there. Absolutely level

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ground. Like a floor. Won't take a great deal of work to turn it into a field."

The stewards brought coffee and brandy and a box of good cigars. Decker and his men settled back into their chairs, taking life easy, watching the work going on outside the ship.

"I hate this waiting," Franey said, settling down comfortably to his cigar.

"Part of the job," said Decker. He poured more brandy in his coffee.

By dawn the last machines were set up and either had been moved out to their assigned positions or were parked in the motor pool. The flamers had enlarged the burned over area and three radiation wagons were busy on their rounds. To the south, the airfield had been finished and the jets were lined up and waiting in a plumb-straight row.

SOME of the robots, their work done for the moment, formed themselves in solid ranks to form a solid square, neat and orderly and occupying a minimum of space. They stood there in the square, waiting against the time when they would be needed, a motor pool of robots, a reservoir of manpower.

Finally the gangplank came down and the legionnaires marched out in files of two, with clank and glitter and a remorseless precision that put machines to shame. There were no banners and there were no drums, for these are useless things and the Legion, despite its clank and glitter, was an organization of ruthless efficiency.

The column wheeled and became a line and the line broke up and the platoons moved out toward the planethead perimeter. There, machines and legionnaires and robots manned the frontier Earth had set up on an alien world.

Busy robots staked out and set up an open air pavilion of gaudily-striped canvas that rippled in the breeze, placed tables and chairs beneath its shade, moved in a refrigerator filled with beer and with extra ice compartments.

It finally was safe and comfortable for ordinary men to leave the shelter of the ship.

Organization, Decker told himself—organization and efficiency and leaving not a thing to chance. Plug every loophole before it became a loophole. Crush possible resistance before it developed as resistance. Gain absolute control over a certain number of square feet of planet and operate from there.

Later, of course, there were certain chances taken; you just couldn't eliminate them all. There would be field trips and even with all the precautions that robot and machine and le-

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gionnaire could offer, there would be certain risks. There would be aerial survey and mapping, and these, too, would have elements of chance, but with these elements reduced to the very minimum.

And always there would be the base, an absolutely safe and impregnable base to which a field party or a survey flight could retreat, from which reinforcements could be sent out or counteraction taken.

Foolproof, he told himself. As foolproof as it could be made.

He wondered briefly what had been the matter with him the night before. It had been that young fool, Jackson, of course—a capable biochemist, possibly, but certainly the wrong kind of a man for a job like this. Something had slipped up; the screening board should have stopped a man like Jackson, should have spotted his emotional instability. Not that he could do any actual harm, of course, but he could be upsetting. An irritant, said Decker. That is what he is. Just an irritant.

DECKER laid an armload of paraphernalia on the long table underneath the gay pavilion. From it he selected a rolled-up sheet of map paper, unrolled it, spread it flat and thumbtacked it at four corners. On it a portion of the river and the mountains to the west had been roughly penciled in. The base was represented by an X-ed through square —but the rest of it was blank.

But it would be filled in; as the days went by it would take on shape and forms.

From the field to the south a jet whooshed into the sky, made a lazy turn and straightened out to streak toward the west. Decker walked to the edge of the pavilion's shade and watched it as it dwindled out of sight. That would be Jarvis and Donnelly, assigned to the preliminary survey of the southwest sector between the base and the western mountains.

Another jet rose lazily, trailing its column of exhaust, gathered speed and sprang into the sky. Freeman and Johns, he thought.

Decker went back to the table, pulled out a chair and sat down. He picked up a pencil and tapped it idly on the almost-blank map paper. Behind his back he heard another jet whoom upward from the field.

He let his eyes take in the base. Already it was losing its raw, burned-over look. Already it had something of the look of Earth about it, of the efficiency and common sense and get-the-job-done attitude of the men of Earth.

Small groups of men stood around talking. One of them, he

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saw, was squatted on the ground, talking something over with three squatting robots. Others of them walked around, sizing up the situation.

Decker grunted with satisfaction. A capable gang of men, he thought. To get down to real work, most of them would have to wait around until the first surveys came in, but even while they waited they would not be idle.

They'd take soil samples and test them. The life that swarmed in the soil would be captured and brought in by grinning robots and the squirming, vicious things could be pinned down and investigated . . . photographed, X-rayed, dissected, analyzed, observed, put through reaction tests. Trees and plants and grasses would be catalogued and attempts made to classify them. Test pits would be dug for a look at soil strata. The river's water would be analyzed. Seines would dredge up some of the life they held. Wells would be driven to establish water tables.

All of this here, at the moment, while they waited for the first preliminary flights to bring back data that would pinpoint other areas worthy of investigation.

Once those reports were in, the work would be started in dead earnest. Geologists and mineral men would probe into the planet's hide. Weather observation points would be set up. Botanists would take far-ranging check samples. Each man would do the work for which he had been trained. Field reports would pour back to the base, there to be correlated and fitted into the picture.

Work then, work in plenty. Work by day and night. And all the time the base would be a bit of Earth, a few square yards held inviolate against all another world might muster.

DECKER sat easily in his chair and felt the breeze that came beneath the canvas, a gentle breeze that ruffled through his hair, rattled the papers on the table and twitched the tacked-down map. It was pleasant here, he thought. But it wouldn't stay pleasant long. It never did.

Someday, he thought, I'll find a pleasant planet, a paradise planet where the weather's always perfect and there is food for the picking of it and natives that are intelligent to talk with and companionable in other ways . . . and I will never leave it. I'll refuse to leave when the ship is ready to blast off. I'll live out my days in a fascinating corner of a lousy galaxy—a galaxy that is gaunt with hunger and mad with savagery and lonely beyond all that may be said of loneliness.

He looked up from his revery and saw Jackson standing at the

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pavilion's edge, watching him.

"What's the matter, Jackson?" Decker asked with sudden bitterness. "Why aren't you—"

"They're bringing in a native, sir," said Jackson, breathlessly. "One of the things Waldron and Dickson saw."

The native was humanoid, but he was not human.

As Waldron and Dickson had said, he was a match-stick man, a flesh and blood extension of a drawing a four-year-old might make. He was black as the ace of spades and he wore no clothing, but the eyes that looked out of the pumpkin-shaped head at Decker were bright with a light that might have been intelligence.

Decker tensed as he looked into those eyes. Then he looked away, saw the men standing silently around the pavilion's edge, silent and waiting, tense as he was.

SLOWLY Decker reached out his hand to one of the two headsets of the mentograph. His fingers closed over it and for a moment he felt a vague, but forceful reluctance to put it on. It was disturbing to contact, or attempt to contact, an alien mind. It gave one a queasy feeling in the pit of the stomach. It was a thing, he thought, that Man never had been intended to do—an experience that was utterly foreign to any human background.

He lifted the headset slowly, fitted it over his skull, made a sign toward the second set.

For a long moment the alien eyes watched him, the creature standing erect and motionless.

Courage, thought Decker. Raw and naked courage, to stand there in this suddenly unfamiliar environment that blossomed almost overnight on familiar ground, to stand there motionless and erect, surrounded by creatures that must look as if they had dropped from some horrible nightmare.

The humanoid took one step closer to the table, reached out a hand and took the headset. Fumbling with its unfamiliarity, he clamped it on his head. And never for a moment did the eyes waver from Decker's eyes, always alert and watchful.

Decker forced himself to relax, tried to force his mind into an attitude of peace and calm. That was a thing you had to be careful of. You couldn't scare these creatures—you had to lull them, quiet them down, make them feel your friendliness. They would be upset, and a sudden thought, even a suggestion of human brusqueness would wind them up tighter than a drum.

There was intelligence here, he told himself, being careful to keep his mind unruffled, a greater intelligence than one would think looking at the creature. Intelli-

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gence enough to know that he should put on the headset, and guts enough to do it.

HE caught the first faint mental whiff of the match-stick man, and the pit of his stomach contracted suddenly and there was an ache around his chest. There was nothing in the thing he caught, nothing that could be put to words, but there was an alienness, as a smell is alien. There was a non-human connotation that set one's teeth on edge. He fought back the gagging blackness of repulsive disgust that sought to break the smooth friendliness he held within his mind.

"We are friendly," Decker forced himself to think. "We are friendly. We are friendly. We are friendly. We are friendly. We are —"

"You should not have come," said the thought of the match-stick man.

"We will not harm you," Decker thought. "We are friendly. We will not harm you. We will not harm—"

"You will never leave," said the humanoid, his eyes still on Decker's.

"Let us be friends," thought Decker. "Let us be friends. We have gifts. We will help you. We will—"

"You should not have come," said the match-stick thought. "But since you are here, you can never leave."

Humor him, thought Decker to himself. Humor him.

"All right, then," he thought. "We will stay. We will stay and we will be friendly. We will stay and teach you. We will give you the things we have brought for you and we will stay with you."

"You will not leave," said the match-stick man's thought, and there was something so cold and logical and matter-of-fact about the way the thought was delivered, that Decker suddenly was cold.

The humanoid meant it—meant every word he said. He was not being dramatic, nor was he blustering—but neither was he bluffing. He actually thought that the humans would not leave, that they would not live to leave the planet.

Decker smiled softly to himself.

"You will die here," said the humanoid thought.

"Die?" asked Decker. "What is die?"

The match-stick man's thought was pure disgust. Deliberately, he reached up and took off the headset, laid it carefully back upon the table.

Then he turned and walked away and not a man made a move to stop him.

Decker took off the headset, slammed it on the table top.

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"Jackson," he said, "pick up that phone and tell the Legion to let him through. Let him leave. Don't try to stop him."

He sat limply in his chair and looked at the ring of faces that was watching him.

Waldron asked, "What is it, Decker?"

"He sentenced us to death," said Decker. "He said that we would not leave the planet. He said that we would die here."

"Strong words," said Waldron.

"He meant them," Decker said.

He lifted a hand, flipped it wearily. "He doesn't know, of course," he said. "He really thinks that he can stop us leaving. He thinks that we will die."

It was an amusing situation, really. That a naked humanoid should walk out of the jungle and threaten to do away with a human survey party, that he should really think that he could do it. That he should be so positive about it.

But there was not a single smile on any of the faces that looked at Decker.

"We can't let it get us," Decker said.

"Nevertheless," Waldron declared, "we should take all precautions."

Decker nodded. "We'll go on emergency alert immediately," he said. "We'll stay that way until we're sure . . . until we're absolutely sure that. . . ."

HIS voice trailed off. Sure of what? Sure that an alien savage who wore no clothing, who had not a sign of culture about him, could wipe out a group of humans protected by a ring of steel, held within a guard of machines and robots and a group of fighting men who knew all there was to know concerning the refinements of dealing out swift and merciless extermination to anything that moved against them?

Ridiculous!

Of course it was ridiculous!

And yet the eyes had held intelligence. The being had not only intelligence, but courage. He had stood within a circle of—to him—ailen beings, and he had not flinched. He had faced the unknown and said what there was to say and then had walked away with a dignity any human would have been proud to wear. He must have guessed that the alien beings within the confines of the base were not of his own planet, for he had said that they should not have come, and his thought had implied that he was aware they were not of this world of his. He had understood that he was supposed to put on the headset, but whether that was an act more of courage than of intelligence one would never know —for you could not know if he had realized what the headset had been for. Not knowing, the naked courage of clamping it to

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his head was of an order that could not be measured.

"What do you think?" Decker asked Waldron.

"We'll have to be careful," Waldron told him evenly. "We'll have to watch our step. Take all precautions now that we are warned. But there's nothing to be scared of, nothing we can't handle."

"He was bluffing," Dickson said. "Trying to scare us into leaving."

Decker shook his head. "I don't think he was," he said. "I tried to bluff him and it didn't work. He's just as sure as we are."

The work went on. There was no attack.

THE jets roared out and thrummed away, mapping the land. Field parties went out cautiously. They were flanked by robots and by legionnaires and preceded by lumbering machines that knifed and tore and burned a roadway through even the most stubborn of the terrain they went up against. Radio weather stations were set up at distant points and at the base the weather tabulators clicked off on tape the data that the stations sent back.

Other field parties were flown into the special areas pinpointed for more extensive exploration and investigation.

And nothing happened.

The days went past.

The weeks went past.

The machines and robots watched and the legionnaires stood ready and the men hurried with their work so they could get off the planet.

A bed of coal was found and mapped. An iron range was discovered. One area in the mountains to the west crawled with radioactive ores. The botanists found twenty-seven species of edible fruit. The base swarmed with animals that had been trapped as specimens and remained as pets.

And a village of the matchstick men was found.

It wasn't much of a place. Its huts were primitive. Its sanitation was non-existent. Its people were peaceful.

Decker left his chair under the striped pavilion to lead a party to the village.

The party entered cautiously, weapons ready but being very careful not to move too fast, not to speak too quickly, not to make a motion that might be construed as hostile.

The natives sat in their doorways and watched them. They did not speak and they scarcely moved a muscle. They simply watched the humans as they marched to the center of the village.

There the robots set up a table and placed a mentograph upon

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it. Decker sat down in a chair and put one of the headsets on his skull. The rest of the party waited off to one side. Decker waited at the table.

They waited for an hour; not a native stirred. None came forward to put on the other headset.

DECKER took off the headset wearily and placed it on the table.

"It's no use," he said. "It won't work. Go ahead and take your pictures. Do anything you wish. But don't disturb the natives. Don't touch a single thing."

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his steaming face.

Waldron came and leaned on the table. "What do you make of it?" he asked.

Decker shook his head. "It haunts me," he said. "There's just one thing that I am thinking. It must be wrong. It can't be right. But the thought came to me and I can't get rid of it."

"Sometimes that happens," Waldron said. "No matter how illogical a thing may be, it sticks with a man, like a burr inside his brain."

"The thought is this," said Decker. "That they have told us all that they have to tell us. That they have nothing more they wish to say to us."

"That's what you thought," said Waldron.

Decker nodded. "A funny thing to think," he said. "Out of clear sky. And it can't be right."

"I don't know," said Waldron. "Nothing's right here. Notice that they haven't got a single iron tool. Not a scrap of metal in evidence at all. Their cooking utensils are stone, a sort of funny stuff like soapstone. What few tools they have are stone. And yet they have a culture. And they have it without metal."

"They're intelligent," said Decker. "Look at them watching us. Not afraid. Just waiting. Calm and sure of themselves. And that fellow who came into the base. He knew what to do with the headset."

Waldron sucked thoughtfully at a tooth. "We better be getting back to base," he said. "It's getting late." He held his wrist in front of him. "My watch has stopped. What time do you have, Decker?"

Decker lifted his arm and Waldron heard the sharp gasp of his indrawn breath. Slowly, Decker raised his head, looked at the other man.

"My watch has stopped, too," he said and his voice was scarcely louder than a whisper.

For a moment they were graven images, shocked into immobility by a thing that should have been no more than an inconvenience. Then Waldron sprang erect from the table,

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whirled to face the men and robots.

"Assemble!" he shouted. "Back to the base. Quick!"

The men came running. The robots fell into place. The column marched away. The natives sat quietly in their doorways and watched them as they left.

Decker sat in his camp chair and listened to the canvas of the pavilion snapping softly in the wind, alive in the wind, talking and laughing to itself. A lantern, hung on a ring above his head, swayed gently, casting fleeting shadows that seemed at times to be the shadows of living, moving things. A robot stood stiffly and quietly beside one of the pavilion poles.

Stolidly, Decker reached out a finger and stirred the little pile of wheels and springs that lay upon the table.

Sinister, he thought.

Sinister and queer.

The guts of watches, lying on the table.

Not of two watches alone, not only his and Waldron's watches, but many other watches from the wrists of other men. All of them silent, stilled in their task of marking time.

NIGHT had fallen hours before, but the base still was astir with activity that was at once feverish and furtive. Men moved about in the shadows and crossed the glaring patches of brilliance shed by the batteries of lights set up by the robots many weeks before. Watching the men, one would have sensed that they moved with a haunting sense of doom. Would have known as well that they knew, deep in their inmost hearts, that there was no doom to fear. No definite thing that one could put a finger on and say this is the thing to fear. No direction that one might point and say doom lies here, waiting to spring upon us.

Just one small thing.

Watches had stopped running.

And that was a simple thing for which there must be some simple explanation.

Except, thought Decker, on an alien planet no occurrence, no accident or incident, can be regarded as a simple thing for which a simple explanation must necessarily be anticipated. For the matrix of cause and effect, the mathematics of chance, may not hold true on an alien planet as they hold true on Earth.

There was one rule, Decker thought grimly.

One rule: Take no chances.

That was the one safe rule to follow, the only rule to follow.

Following it, he had ordered all field parties back to base, had ordered the crew to prepare the ship for emergency takeoff, had alerted the robots to be ready at an instant to get the machines

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aboard. To be prepared even to desert the machines and leave without them if circumstances should dictate that such was necessary.

Having done that, there was no more to do but wait. Wait until the field parties came back from their advance camps. Wait until some reason could be assigned to the failure of the watches.

It was not a thing, he told himself, that should be allowed to panic one. It was something to recognize, not to disregard. It was a circumstance that made necessary a certain number of precautions, but it was not a situation that should make one lose all sense of proportion.

You could not go back to Earth and say: "Well, you see, our watches stopped and so—"

A footstep sounded and he swung around in his chair. It was Jackson.

"What is it, Jackson?" Decker asked.

"The camps aren't answering, sir," said Jackson. "The operator has been trying to raise them and there is no answer. Not a single peep."

Decker grunted. "Take it easy," he said. "They will answer. Give them time."

HE wished, even as he spoke, that he could feel some of the assurance that he tried to put into his voice. For a second, a rising terror mounted in his throat and he choked it back.

"Sit down," he said. "We'll sit here and have a beer, and then we'll go down to the radio shack and see what's doing."

He rapped on the table. "Beer," he said. "Two beers."

The robot standing by the pavilion pole did not answer.

He made his voice louder.

The robot did not stir.

Decker put his clenched fists upon the table and tried to rise, but his legs suddenly were cold and had unaccountably turned to water, and he could not raise himself.

"Jackson," he panted, "go and tap that robot on the shoulder. Tell him we want some beer."

He saw the fear that whitened Jackson's face as he rose and moved slowly forward. Inside himself, he felt the terror start and worry at his throat.

Jackson stood beside the robot and reached out a hesitant hand, tapped him gently on the shoulder, tapped him harder—and the robot fell flat upon its face!

Feet hammered across the hard-packed ground, heading for the pavilion.

Decker jerked himself around, sat foursquare and solid in his chair, waiting for the man who ran.

It was MacDonald, the chief engineer.

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He halted in front of Decker and his hands, scarred and grimy with years of fighting balky engines, reached down and gripped the boards of the table's edge. His seamy face was twisted as if he were about to weep.

"The ship, sir. The ship. . . ."

Decker nodded, almost idly. "I know, Mr. MacDonald. The ship won't run."

MacDonald gulped. "The big stuff's all right, sir. But the little gadgets . . . the injector mechanism . . . the—"

He stopped abruptly and stared at Decker. "You knew," he said. "How did you know?"

"I knew," said Decker, "that someday it would come. Not like this, perhaps. But in any one of several ways. I knew that the day would come when our luck would run too thin. I talked big, like the rest of you, of course, but I knew that it would come. The day when we'd covered all the possibilities but the one that we could not suspect and that, of course, would be the one that would ruin us."

HE was thinking: The natives had no metal. No sign of any metal in their village, at all. Their dishes were soapstone and they wore no ornaments. Their implements were stone. And yet they were intelligent enough, civilized enough, cultured enough, to have fabricated metal. For there was metal here, a great deposit of it in the western mountains. They had tried perhaps, many centuries ago. Had fashioned metal tools and had them go to pieces underneath their fingers in a few short weeks.

A civilization without metal. A culture without metal. It was unthinkable. Take metal from a man and he went back to the caves. Take metal from a man and he was earthbound, and his bare hands were all he had.

Waldron came into the pavilion, walking quietly in the silence. "The radio is dead," he said, "and the robots are dying like flies. The place is littered with them, just so much scrap metal."

Decker nodded. "The little stuff, the finely fabricated, will go first," he said. "Like watches and radio innards and robot brains and injector mechanisms. Next, the generators will go and we will have no lights or power. Then the machines will break down and the Legion's weapons will be no more than clubs. After that the big stuff, probably."

"The native told us," Waldron said, "when you talked to him. 'You will never leave,' he said."

"We didn't understand," said Decker. "We thought he was threatening us, and we knew that we were too big, too well guarded for any threat of his to harm us.

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He wasn't threatening us at all, of course, just telling us."

He made a hopeless gesture with his hands. "What is it?"

"No one knows," said Waldron quietly. "Not yet, at least. Later we may find out, but it won't help us any. A microbe, maybe. A virus. Something that eats iron after it has been subjected to heat or alloyed with other metals. It doesn't go for iron ore. If it did, that deposit we found would have been gone long ago."

"If that is true," said Decker, "we've brought it the first square meal it's had in a long, long time. A thousand years. Maybe a million years. There is no fabricated metal here. How would it survive? Without stuff to eat, how would it live?"

"I wouldn't know," said Waldron. "It might not be a metal-eating organism at all. It might be something else. Something in the atmosphere, something we should have looked for."

"We tested the atmosphere."

BUT, even as the words left his mouth, Decker saw how foolish they were. They had tested the atmosphere, but how could they have detected something they had never run across before? Man's yardstick was limited—limited to the things he knew about, limited by the circle of his own experience.

He guarded himself against the obvious and the imaginable. He could not guard himself against the unknowable or the unimaginable.

Decker rose and saw Jackson still standing by the pavilion pole, with the robot stretched at his feet.

"You have your answer," he told the biochemist. "Remember that first day here? You talked with me in the lounge."

Jackson nodded. "I remember, sir."

And suddenly, Decker realized, the entire base was quiet.

A gust of wind came out of the jungle and rattled the canvas.

Now, for the first time since they had landed, he caught in the wind the alien smell of an alien world.

THE END

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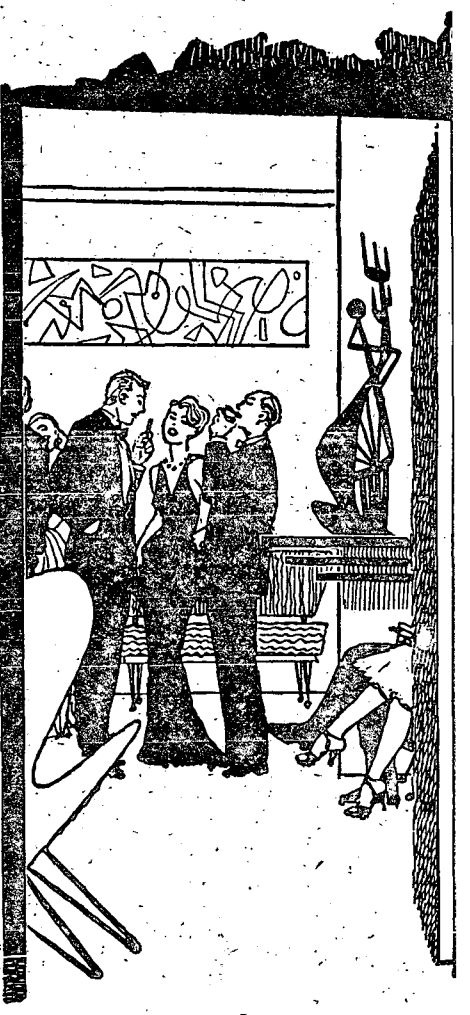
THE DARK ROOM

By THEODORE STURGEON

Illustrator EMSH



Read any new Sturgeon stories lately? (Aside from "When You Care, When You Love," which appeared in 1962, and a short, non-SF item in *Playboy* a few years back, neither have we.) Been wondering whatever happened to one of the best stylists, one of the most outspoken writers the field has ever produced? So have we. But we do remember that the better the writer, the more of himself he puts into his stories, and when the author happens to be a Sturgeon—who writes as much from the heart as from the head—then the toll is a little higher than for most; and we wait patiently for more remarkable stories like "It," "Saucer of Loneliness," "Baby Is Three," "The Silken Swift," and "The Man Who Lost the Sea." For those of you who are beginning to feel the strain, however, we recommend "The Dark Room." It begins provocatively, it moves well, it reads wonderfully. In other words, it's a Sturgeon story.

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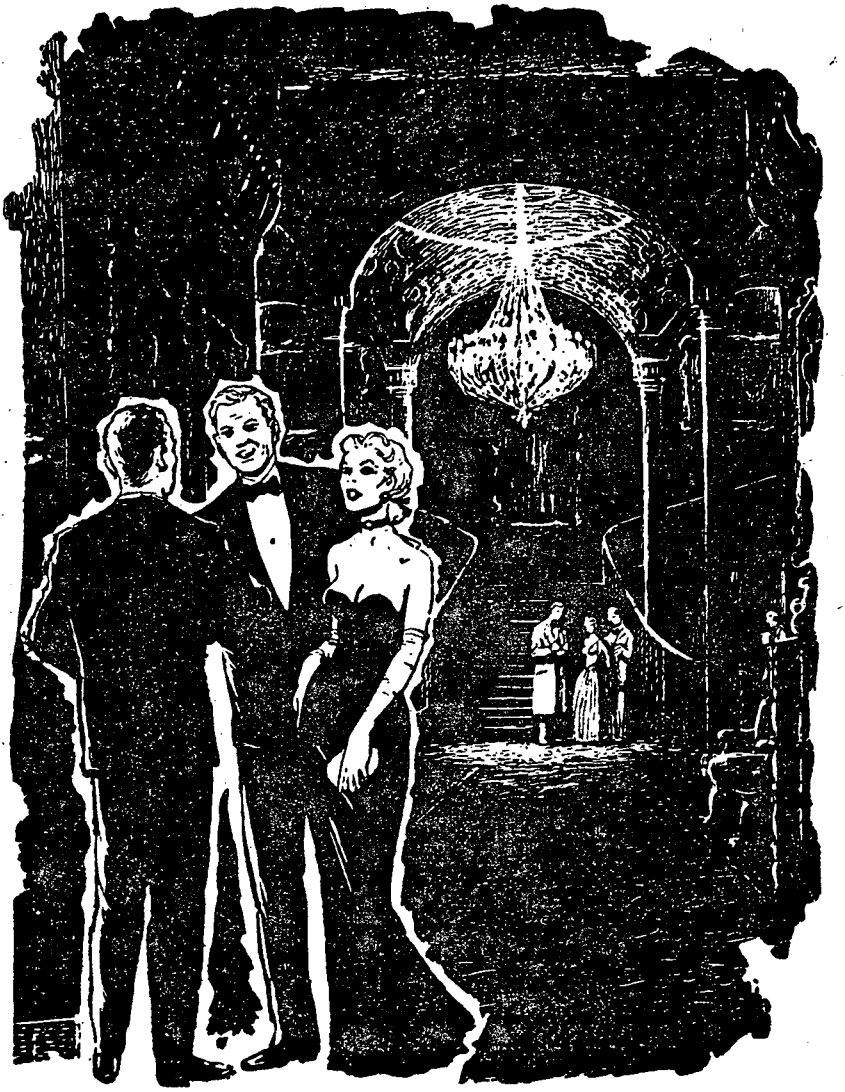

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THE world ended at that damn party of Beck's.

At least if it had fallen into the sun, or if it had collided with a comet, it would have been all right with me. I mean, I'd have been able to look at that fellow in the barber chair, and that girl on the TV screen, and somebody fresh from Tasmania, and I'd have been able to say, "Ain't it hell, neighbor?" and he would've looked at me with sick eyes, feeling what I felt about it.

But this was much worse. Where you sit and look around, that's the center of the whole universe. Everything you see from there circles around you, and you're the center. Other people share a lot of it, but they're circling around out there too. The only one who comes right in and sits with you, looking out from the same place, is the one you love. That's your world. Then one night you're at a party and the one you love disappears with a smooth-talking mudhead; you look around and they're gone; you worry and keep up the bright talk; they come back and the mudhead calls you "old man" and is too briskly polite to you, and she—she won't look you in the eye. So the center of the universe is suddenly one great big aching nothing, nothing at all—it's the end of your world. The whole universe gets a little shaky then, with nothing at its center.

Of course, I told myself, this is all a crazy suspicion, and you, Tom Conway, ought to hang your head and apologize. This sort of thing happens to people, but not to us. Women do this to their husbands, but Opie doesn't do this to me—does she, *does she?*

We got out of there as soon as I could manage it without actually pushing Opie out like a wheelbarrow. We left party noises behind us, and I remember one deep guttural laugh especially that I took extremely personally, though I knew better. It was black dark outside, and we had to feel the margins of the path through our soles before our eyes got accustomed to the night. Neither of us said anything. I could almost sense the boiling, bottled-up surging agony in Opie, and I knew she felt it in me, because we always felt things in each other that way.

Then we were through the arched gateway in the hedge and there was concrete sidewalk under us instead of gravel. We turned north toward where the car was parked and I glanced quickly at her. All I could see was the turn of her throat, curved a bit more abruptly than usual because of the stiff, controlled way she was holding her head.

I said to myself, something's happened here and it's bad. Well, I'll have to ask her. I know, I

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thought, with a wild surge of hope, I'll ask her what happened; I'll ask her if it was the worst possible thing, and she'll say no, and then I'll ask her if it's the next worse, and so on, until when I get to it I'll be able to say things aren't so bad after all.

So I said, "You and that guy, did you—" and all the rest of it, in words of one syllable. The thing I'm grateful to her about is that she didn't let one full second of silence go by before she answered me.

She said, "Yes."

And that was the end of the world.

THE end of the world is too big a thing to describe in detail. It's too big a thing to remember clearly. The next thing that happened, as far as I can recall, is that there was gravel under my feet again and party noises ahead of me, and Opie sprinting past me and butting me in the chest to make me stop. "Where are you going?" she gasped.

I pushed her but she bounded right back against me. "Get out of the way," I said, and the sound of my voice surprised me.

"Where are you going?" she said again.

"Back there," I said. "I'm going to kill him."

"Why?"

I didn't answer that because there wasn't room inside me for such a question, but she said, "He didn't do it by himself, Tom. I was . . . I probably did more than he did. Kill me."

I looked down at the faint moon-glimmer that told where her face was. I whispered because my voice wouldn't do anything else, "I don't want to kill you, Opie."

She said, with an infinite weariness, "There's less reason to kill him. Come on. Let's go—" I thought she was going to say "home," and winced, but she realized as much as I did that the word didn't mean anything anymore. "Let's go," she said.

When the world ends it doesn't do it once and finish with the business. It rises up and happens again, sometimes two or three times in a minute, sometimes months apart but for days at a time. It did it to me again then, because the next thing I can remember is driving the car. Next to me where Opie used to sit was just a stretch of seat-cushion. Where there used to be a stretch of seat-cushion, over next to the right-hand door, Opie sat.

Back there in the path Opie had asked me a one-word question, and in me there was no room for it. Now, suddenly, there was no room in me for anything else. The word burst out of me, pressed out by itself.

"Why?"

Opie sat silently. I waited until

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I couldn't stand it any longer and then looked over at her. A streetlight fled past and the pale gold wash of it raced across her face. She seemed utterly composed, but her eyes were too wide, and I sensed that she'd held them that way long enough for the eyeballs to dry and hurt her. "I asked you why," I snarled.

"I heard you," she said gently. "I'm just trying to think."

"You don't know why?"

She shook her head.

I looked straight through the windshield again and wrenched the wheel. I'd damned near climbed a bank. I was going too fast, too. I knew she'd seen it coming, and she hadn't moved a muscle to stop it. I honestly don't think she cared just then.

I got the car squared away and slowed down a little. "You've got to know why. A person doesn't just—just go ahead and—and do something without a reason."

"I did," she said in that too-tired voice.

I'd already said that people don't just do things that way, so there was no point in going over it again. Which left me nothing further to say. Since she offered nothing more, we left it like that.

A COUPLE of days later Hank blew into my office. He shut the door, which people don't usually do, and came over and half-sat on the desk, swinging one long leg. "What happened?" he said.

Hank is my boss, a fine guy, and Opie's brother.

"What happened to who?" I asked him. I was as casual as a guy can be who is rudely being forced to think about something he's trying to wall up.

He wagged his big head. "No games, Tom. What happened?"

I quit pretending. "So that's where she is. Home to mother, huh?"

"Have you been really interested in where she is?"

"Cut it out, Hank. This 'have you hurt my little sister, you swine' routine isn't like you."

He had big amber eyes like Opie's, and it was just as hard to tell what flexed and curled behind them. Finally he said, "You know better than that. You and Opie are grownups and usually behave like grownups."

"We're not now?"

"I don't know. Tom, I'm not trying to protect Opie. Not from you. I know you both too well."

"So what *are* you trying to do?"

"I just want to know what happened."

"Why?" I rapped. There it was again: why, why, why.

He scratched his head. "Not to get sloppy about it, I want to know because I think that you and Opie are the two finest bi-

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peds that ever got together to make a fine combo. I have one of these logical minds. A fact plus a fact plus a force gives a result. If you know all the facts, you can figure the result. I've been thinking for a lot of years that I know all the facts about both of you, everything that matters. And this—this just doesn't figure. Tom, what happened?"

He was beginning to annoy me. "Ask Opie," I spat. It sounded ugly. Why not? It was ugly.

HANK swung the foot and looked at me. I suddenly realized that this guy was miserable. "I did ask her," he said in a choked voice.

I waited.

"She told me."

That rocked me. "She told you what?"

"What happened. Saturday night, at Beck's party."

"She told you?" I couldn't get over that. "What in time made her tell you?"

"I made her. She held out for a long while and then let me have it, in words of one syllable. I guess it was to shut me up."

I put my head in my hands. It made a difference to have someone else in on it. I didn't know whether I cared for the difference or not.

I jumped up then and yelled at him. "So you know what happened and you came bleating in here what happened, what happened! Why ask me, if you know?"

"You got me wrong, Tom," he said. His voice was so soft against my yelling that it stopped me like a cut throat. "Yeah, I know what she did. What I want to know is what happened to make her do it."

I didn't say anything.

"Have you talked to anyone about it?" he wanted to know.

I shook my head.

He spread his hands. "Talk to me about it."

When I didn't move, he leaned closer. "What do you say, Tom?"

"I say," I breathed, "that I got work to do. We have a magazine to get out. This is company time, remember?"

He got up off the desk right away. Did you ever listen to someone walk away from you when you weren't looking at him, and know by his footsteps that he was hurt and angry?

He opened the door and hesitated. "Tom . . . ."

"What?"

"If you've got nothing to do this evening . . . call me. I'll come over."

I glared at him. "Fat chance."

He didn't say anything else. Just went away. I sat there staring at the open door. Here was a guy bragging how much he knew about me. Thinking I'd want to call him, talk to him.

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Fat chance.

I didn't call him, either. Not until after eight o'clock. His phone didn't get through the first ring. He must have been sitting with his hand on it. "Hank?" I said.

He said, "I'll be right over," and hung up.

I had drinks ready when he got there. He came in saying, the stupid way people do, "How are you?"

"I'm dead," I said. I was, too. No sleep for two nights; dead tired. No Opie in the house. Dead. Dead inside.

He sat down and had sense enough to say nothing. When I coud think of something to say, it was, "Hank, I'm not going to say anything about Opie that sounds lousy. But I have to check, I have to be sure. Just what did she tell you?"

He sighed and said what Opie had done. What she had done to me, to a marriage. She'd told him, all right. He said it and, "Better drink your drink, Tom."

I drank it. I needed to. Then I looked at him. "Now that's on the record, what do you do about it?"

Hank didn't say anything. I covered my face and rocked back and forth. "I guess this happens to lots of guys, their wives making it with someone else. Sometimes it breaks them up, sometimes it doesn't. How do they live when it doesn't?"

Hank just fiddled with a table lighter. I picked up my empty glass and looked at it and all of a sudden the stem broke in two. Red blood began welling out. Hank yelped and came to me with his handkerchief. He tied it around my wrist and pulled it so tight it hurt. "Why is it so important that Opie and I get back together, Hank? To you, I mean?"

He gave me a strange look and went into the bathroom. I heard him rummaging around in the medicine chest. "There's more in it than you and Opie, Tom," he called out. He came back in with bandages. "I guess you're so full of this that it's around you every way you look, but there are other things going on in the world, honest."

"I guess there are, but they don't seem to matter."

"HOLD still," he said. "This'll hurt." He stuck the iodine on my cut. It hurt like hell and I wished all hurts were as easy to take. He said, "Something awful funny is going on at Beck's."

"What happened to me is funny?" I said.

"Shut up. You know what I mean." He finished the bandage and went to the bar. "Well, maybe you don't. Look, how long have you known Beck?"

"Years."

"How well?"

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"As well as you can know a guy you went to school with, roomed with, lent money to and had lunch with four times a week for eight-nine years."

"Ever notice anything odd about him?"

"No. Not Beck. The original predictable boy. Right-wing Republican, solid-color tie, independent income, thinks "Rustle of Spring" is opera, drinks vermouth-and-soda in hot weather and never touches a martini until 4 P.M. Likes to have people around, all kinds of people. The wackier the better. But he never did, said, or thought a wacky thing in his life."

"Never? You did say never?"

"Never. Except—"

"Except?"

I looked at the bandage he had made. Very neat. "That rumpus room of his. What got into him to fix it up that way I'll never know. I almost dropped dead when I saw it."

"Why?"

"Have you been there?"

HE nodded. Something uncoiled back of his eyes, and it reminded me so much of Opie that I grunted the way a man does when he walks into a wagon-tongue in the dark. I took a good pull at the glass he'd brought and hung on to the subject, hard. "So you've been there. Does that look like the setup of a man who's surrounded himself all his life with nothing more modern than Dutch Queen Anne?"

He didn't say anything.

"I tell you I *know*. I think Beck would ride around in a Victorian brougham if it wouldn't make him conspicuous. He hates to be conspicuous as much as he hates modern furniture."

"A room can't get more 'modern' than that one," said Hank.

"Foam rubber and chromium," I said reminiscently. "Fireplace of black marble; high-gloss black Formica on the table-tops. Wall-to-wall broadlooms and free-form scatter-rugs. Fluorescents, all in coves, yet. The bookcase looks like a bar; the bar looks like a legitimate flight of steps."

"Maybe he's a masochist, making himself unhappy in a house furnished the way he hates it."

"He's no masochist, unless you figure the painful company of some of the weirdies he invites to his parties. And he doesn't live in a *house* furnished in Science Fiction Modern. He lives in a house with alternate Chinese Chippendale and that Dutch Queen Anne I was talking about. Only that room, that one rumpus room, is modern; and what he did it for I'll never know. It must have cost him a young fortune."

"It cost him what you might call a middle-aged fortune," Hank said bluntly. "I got the figures."

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I snapped out of the mild reminiscences. "Have you now! Hank, what's the burning interest in Beck and his decor?"

HANK got up, stretched, sat down again and leaned forward with such earnestness and urgency that I drew back. "Tom, suppose I could prove that it wasn't her fault at all?"

I thought about it. Finally, between my teeth, I said, "If you could really prove that, I know one mudhead that would get thoroughly killed."

"There'll be none of that talk," he rapped. I squinted up at him and decided not to protest. He really meant it. He went on, "You have *got* to understand exactly what I mean." He paused to chew words before he let them out, then said, "I don't want you to get up any wild hopes. I'm not going to be able to prove Opie didn't . . . didn't do what she said she did Saturday night. She did it, and that's that. Shut up, now, Tom—don't say it! Not to me. She's my sister; do you think I'm enjoying this?" When I simmered down a bit, Hank said, "All I think I can prove is that what happened was completely beyond her control, and that she's completely innocent in terms of intention, even if she is guilty in terms of action."

"I'd like that," I said, with all my heart. "I'd like that just fine. Only it's hardly the kind of thing you can really prove." I double-took it. "What are you talking about?" I demanded angrily. "You mean she was hypnotized?"

"I do not," he said positively. "No amount of hypnotism would make her do something she didn't want to do, and I'm working on the premise that she didn't want to."

"Dope, then?"

"I don't think so. Did she look doped to you?"

"No." I thought back carefully. "Besides, I never heard of a drug that could do that to a woman that quickly and leave no after-effects."

"There is none, and if there were it wasn't used on her."

"Cut out the guessing games then, and tell me what it was!"

He looked at me and his face changed. "Sorry," he said softly. "I can't. I don't know. But I mean to find out."

"You better say more," I said, dazed. "You lost me back there some place."

"You know where Klaus was picked up?"

I started. "The atom spy? No. What's that got to do with it?"

"Maybe a lot," said Hank. "Just a hunch I've got. Anyway, they got him at one of Beck's parties."

"I'll be damned," I breathed. "I didn't know that."

"Most people don't. It was one-

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two-three-hush. There was a Central Intelligence agent there and Klaus walked over to him and spilled the whole thing. The agent got him out of there and arrested him, then checked his story. It checked all right. Do you know *Cry for Clara?*"

"Do I know it? I wish I'd never heard it. Seventeen weeks on the 'Hit Parade,' and squalling out of every radio and every record store and juke-box in creation. Do I know it?"

"Know who wrote it?"

"No."

"Guy called Willy Simms. Never wrote a song before, never wrote one since."

"So?"

"He did the first draft at one of Beck's parties."

"I don't see what that has to do with—"

He interrupted me. "The hen fight that put two nice deep fingernail gouges across Marie Munro's million-dollar face happened at Beck's. A school-teacher did it—an otherwise harmless old biddy who'd never even seen a Munro picture and hadn't even spoken to The Face that evening. The man who—"

"Wait a minute, wait a min—" I started, but he wouldn't wait.

"The man who killed that preacher on Webb Street two

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weeks ago—remember?—did it with Beck's poker, which he threw out of Beck's rumpus room window like a damn javelin. That hilarious story—I heard you telling it yourself—about the pansy breeder at the Flower Show.

"Don't tell me that one came from Beck's." I grinned in spite of myself.

"It did. Because of someone's remark that nobody knows where dirty stories originate. And *bing*, that one was originated on the spot." He paused. "By Lila Falsehaven."

"Lila? You mean the white-haired old granny who writes children's books?" I drank on that. That was too fine. "Hank, what are you getting at with all this?"

HANK pulled on an earlobe. "All these things I mentioned—all different, all happening to different kinds of people. I think there's a lowest common denominator."

"You've already told me that; they all happened at Beck's parties."

"The thing I'm talking about *makes* things happen at Beck's parties."

"Aw, for Pete's sake. Coincidence . . . ."

"Coincidence hell!" he rumbled. "Can't you understand that I've known about this thing for a long time now? I'm not telling you all these things occurred to me just since Opie . . . uh . . . since last Saturday night. I'm telling you that what Opie did is another one of those things."

I grunted thoughtfully. "Lowest common denominator. . . . Heck, the main thing all those people have in common is that they have nothing in common."

"That's right," Hank nodded. "That seems to be Beck's rule-of-thumb: always mix them up. A rich one, a talented one, a weird one, a dull one."

"Makes for a good party," I said stupidly.

HE had the good sense not to pick that one up. Good party. Swell party. Opie . . . . No, I wouldn't think about it. I said, "What's this all about, anyway? Why worry so much about Beck? It's his business who he invites. Strange things happen—sure, they'd happen at your house if you filled it up with characters."

"Here's what it's about. I want you to go back there and find out what that lowest common denominator is."

"Why?"

"For the magazine, maybe. It depends. Anyhow, kid, that's an assignment."

"Stick it," I said. "I'm not going back there."

"Why not?"

"That's the stupidest question yet!"

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"Tom," he said gently. "Getting riled up won't help. I really want to know why you don't want to go back. Is it the place you can't stand, or the idea of seeing Opie there?"

"I don't mind the place," I said sullenly.

He was so pleased I was astonished. "Then you can go back. She will never go there again."

You sound real positive."

"I am. Things happen at Beck's parties. But if they happen to you, you don't go back."

"I don't get it."

"Neither do I. But that's one of the things I want you to find out about."

"Hank, this is crazy!"

"Sure it's crazy. And you're just the man for the job."

"Why, especially?"

"Because you know Beck better than most people. Because you have something personal at stake. Because you're a good reporter. And—well, because you're so damn normal."

I didn't feel normal. I said, "If you're so interested in Beck and his shindigs, why don't you chase the story down yourself? You seem to know what to look for."

When he didn't answer, I looked up. He had turned his back. After awhile he said, "I'm one of the ones who can't go back."

I thought that over. "You mean something happened to you?"

"Yes, something happened to me," he snarled in angry mimicry. "And that part of it you can skip."

For the first time I felt that little nubbin of intrigue that bites me when I'm near a really hot story. "So you've taken care of my Saturday nights. What am I supposed to do the rest of the week?"

"You've been around the magazine long enough not to ask me how to do your work. I just mentioned a lot of people. Go find out why they did the things they did." And all of a sudden he stalked to the door, scooped up his hat, growled a noise that was probably "Goodnight," and left.

I WENT to see Lila Falsehaven. It was no trouble at all to get her address from Kiddy-Joy Books, Inc. She invited me to tea when I called her up. Tea, no less. Me. Tom Conway.

She was a real greeting-card grandma. Steel-rimmed specs with the thickest part at the lower edges. Gleaming, perfect, even false teeth. A voice that reminded you of a silver plate full of warm spice cookies. And on the table between us, a silver plate full of warm spice cookies. "Cream?" she said. "Or lemon?"

"Straight."—"I mean, neither, thank you. This place looks just like the place where the Lila Falsehaven books are written."

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"Thank you," she said, inclining her neat little head. She passed me tea in a convoluted bone-china cup I could have sneezed off a mantel at forty paces. "I've been told before that my books and my home and my appearance are those of the perfect grandmother. I've never had a child, you know. But I believe I've more grandchildren than anyone who ever lived." She delivered up an intricate old laugh like intricate old lace.

I tasted the tea. People should drink more tea. I put down the little cup and leaned back and smiled at her. "I like it here."

She blushed like a kid and smiled back. "And now—what can I do for you? Surely that wicked magazine of yours doesn't want a story by me. Or even about me."

"It's not a wicked magazine," I said loyally. "Just true-to-life. We call them as we see them."

"Some truths," she said gently, "are better left uncalled."

"You really believe that?"

"I really do," she said.

"But the world isn't what your grandchildren read about in your books."

"My world is," she said with conviction.

I had come here for something, and now was the time to get it. I shook my head. "Not completely. Some of your world has flower shows with pansies in them."

She didn't make a sound. She closed her eyes, and I watched her smooth old skin turn to ivory and then to paper. I waited. At last her eyes opened again. She looked straight at me, lifted one hand, then the other, spread them apart and placed each on the carven chair-arms. I looked at the hands, and saw each in turn relax as if by a deep effort of will. Her eyes drew me right up out of my chair. Deep in them was a spark, as hot, as bright, and quite as clean as a welding arc. The whole sweet room held its breath.

"Mr. Conway," she said in a voice that was very faint and very distinct, "I believe in truth as I believe in innocence and in beauty, so I shall not lie to you. I understand now that you came here to find out if I was really the one who contrived that filthy anecdote. I was. But if you came to find out why I did it, or what is in me that made it possible, I cannot help you. I'm sorry. If I knew, if I only knew, perhaps I'd tell you. Now you'd better go."

"But —"

Then I found out that the clean bright fire so deep in her eyes could repel as well as attract, and I was in the doorway with my hat in my hand. I said, "I'm sor—" but the way she looked, the way she sat there looking at me without moving, made it impossible for me to speak or bow, or do anything but

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just get out. I knew I'd never be back, too, and that was a shame. She's a nice person. She lives in a nice place.

The whole thing was spoiled, and I felt lousy. Lousy.

MY PRESS card got me as far as Col. Briggs, and the memory of the time I got Briggs out of a raided stag party just after the war got me the rest of the way. If it hadn't been for those two items, I'd never have seen Klaus. The death house was damn near as hard to get into as it was to get out of.

They gave me ten minutes and left me alone with him, though there was a guard standing where he could see in. Klaus did not look as if he'd have brought out the silver tea service even if he had one. All he did when I came in was to say the name of the magazine under his breath, and said that way it sounds pretty dirty. I sat down on the bunk beside him and he got right up off it. I didn't say anything, and after a while that bothered him. I don't suppose anyone did that to him, ever.

"Well, what is it? What do you want?" he snarled finally.

"You'd never guess," I said.

"Am I guilty? Yes. Did I know what I was doing? Yes. Is it true that I just want to see this crummy human race blown off this crummy planet as soon as possible? Yes. Am I sorry? Yes—that I got caught. Otherwise—no." He shrugged. "That's my whole story, you know it, everybody knows it. I've been scooped dry and the bottom scraped. Why can't you guys leave me alone?"

"There's still something I'd like to know, though."

"Don't you read the papers?" he asked. "Once I got nabbed I had no secrets."

"Look," I said, "this guy Stevens—" Stevens was the Central Intelligence man who had dragged him in.

"Yeah, Stevens," Klaus snorted. "Our hero, I not only put him on page one—he's on boxes of breakfast cereal. You *really* got to be a hero to get on corn flakes."

"He wasn't a hero," I said. "He didn't know you from Adam and didn't care until you spilled to him."

Klaus stopped his pacing and slowly turned toward me. "Do you believe that?"

"Why not? That's what happened."

HE CAME and sat beside me, looking at me as if I had turned into a two-headed giraffe. "You know, I've told that to six million different people and you're the first one who ever believed it. What did you say your name was? If you don't mind my asking."

"Conway," I said.

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"I'm glad you came," he said. For him, that was really something.

He shoved back so he could lean against the wall and gave me a cigarette. "What do you want to know?"

"Why you did it."

He looked at me angrily, and I added quickly, "Not about the atom secrets. About the spill."

The angry look went away, but he didn't say anything. I pushed a bit. "You never made another mistake. Nobody in history ever operated as quietly and cleverly as you did. No one in the world suspected you, and as far as I've been able to discover no one was even about to. So you suddenly find yourself at a party with a C.I. man, walk over, and sing. Why?"

He thought about it. "It was a good party," he said, after a bit. Then, "I guess I figured the game had gone on long enough, that's all."

I snorted.

"What's that for?" he wanted to know.

"You don't really believe that."

"I don't?"

"You don't,' I said positively. "That's just something you figured out after it happened. What I want to know is what went on in your head before it happened."

"You know a hell of a lot about how I think," he said sneeringly.

"Sure I do," I said, and when he was quiet, I added, "Don't I?"

"Yeah," he growled. "Yeah." He closed his eyes to think about it, and then said, "You just asked me the one thing I don't know. One second I was sitting there enjoying myself, and the next I was backing that goon-boy into the corner and telling him about my life of sin. It just seemed a good idea at the time."

The guard came then to let me out. "Thanks for coming," Klaus said.

"That's all right. You're sure you can't tell me?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Shall I come back? Maybe after you think about it for a while . . . ."

He shook his head. "Wouldn't do no good," he said positively. "I know, because I haven't thought about anything else much since it happened. But I'm glad somebody believes it, anyway."

"So long. Drop me a note if you figure it out."

I don't know if he ever did. They burned him a few days later. I never got a note.

I grabbed another name from the list I'd run up. Willy Simms. Song writer.

I went into a music shop and asked the man if he had a record of *Cry for Clara*. He looked as if he'd found root beer in a bock bottle. "Still?" he breathed with

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a sort of weary amazement, and went and got the record.

"Look," I told him, "I think this platter is the most awful piece of candy corn that ever rolled out of the Alley." I don't often explain myself to people, but I couldn't have even a total stranger think I liked it.

He leaned across the counter. "Did you know," he said in a much friendlier tone of voice, "that Guy Lombardo is cutting it this week?"

I shared his tired wonder for a long moment, and then got out of there.

ONE and three-quarter million copies sold and still moving, and yet Willy Simms still lived in a place with four flights of stairs up to it. I found the door and leaned against the frame for a while, blowing hard. When the spots went away from my eyes, I knocked. A wrinkled little man opened the door.

"Is Willy Simms here?"

He looked at me and down at the flat record envelope I held. "What's that?"

"Cry for Clara," I said. He took it out of my hand and asked me how much I paid for it. I told him. He held the door open with his foot, scooped up a handful of change from an otherwise empty bookshelf, and counted out the price into my hand. Then he broke the record in two on his thigh, put the pieces together and broke them again, and slung them into the fireplace at his right. "I'm Willy Simms," he said. "Come on in."

I went in and stood just inside. I didn't know what this little prune would do next. I said, "My name's Tom—"

"Drop your hat there," he said. He crossed the room.

"I just dropped in to—"

"Drink?" he asked.

Since I never say no to that, and didn't have to say yes because he was already pouring, I just waited.

He came smiling with a glass. He had good teeth. "Bourbon," he said. "A man's drink. Knew the minute I saw you you were a bourbon man."

I very much prefer rye. I said, "Once in a while—"

"Sure," he said. "Nothing like Bourbon. Sit down."

"Mr. Simms," I said.

"Willy. Nobody ever called me mister. Used to be I wasn't worth a 'mister.' Now I'm too good for it." He salvaged his modesty as he said this with a warm grin. "Maybe you think I shouldn't of busted your record."

"Well," I smiled, "I thought it a bit strange."

"I don't have a copy here and I won't let one in. Two reasons," he barked, making a V with shiny-dry, bony fingers. "First, I

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don't like it. What I specially don't like is the way people try to make me sit and listen to it and tell me how good this part is and that part, and where did I ever get the idea of going from the sub-dominant into an unrelated minor. Yeah, that's what one of them wanted to know."

"I remember that part," I said. "It's—"

"Second," said Willy Simms, "every time I bust one of those records it reminds me I can afford to do it, and I like to be reminded."

"Yeah," I said. "That's—"

"Besides," he said. "any time I bust one, the party walks out of here and buys another. It ain't the royalty, you understand. It's the score I'm running up. They tell me it'll sell two and a quarter million."

"Two and a—"

"You've finished your drink," he said. He took it out of my hand and filled it again. I wished it was rye, raised it to him and then sipped. "Willy," I began.

"I never wrote a song before," Willy said.

"Yes," I answered. "So I—"

"And I'm going to tell you something I ain't told nobody else. I'm going to tell it to you, and from now on, I just decided, I'm going to tell everybody."

He leaned toward me excitedly. I realized that he was boiled. I knew instinctively that it hadn't made any difference in him; he was probably this way cold sober too. He was obviously waiting for me to say something, but by this time I didn't want to spoil anything.

"So I'll tell you first, and it's this: I'm never going to write another song, either."

"But you've just begun to—"

"There's a good reason for it," he said. "Since you ask me, I'll tell you. I ain't going to write another song because I can't. It ain't that I don't read or write music. They say Leadbelly couldn't read music either. And it ain't that I don't want to. I want to, all right. But did you ever hear the old saying lightning never strikes twice in the same place?"

That I could match. "Sure, and they say it's always darkest before the dawn, too, but that doesn't—"

"The real reason," said Willy Simms, "is this." He paused dramatically. "I'm tone deaf. I couldn't carry a chord in a keyster. Do you see a piano here, or even a harmonica?"

"Listen," I said, "no one who was tone deaf could have—"

"Lightning," he said gravely. "It struck, that's all. Way down inside me was one little crumb called *Cry for Clara*, and the lightning struck and drove it out. But there was just the one little crumb there, and now there is no more."

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"Shucks," I said. "Maybe—"

"And I could be wrong even about that," he said morosely. "I don't really believe even the little crumb was there. What I actually did just can't be done, not by me, anyway. Like a lobster writing a book. Like a phonograph playing a pizza pie. Like us not having another drink."

He demonstrated the impossibility of his last remark. I said, "There are certain things a man can do and certain things—"

"Like a trip back to one of Beck's parties," he said. "Some things just can't happen." He glowered at me suddenly. "You don't happen to be a friend of this Beck? This is the guy made me hate myself."

"Me? Why, I—"

"If you were, I'd throw you right down those stairs out there, big as you are." He half rose, and for a split second I was genuinely alarmed. He was one of those people who, in speaking of anger, acts it out, pulsing temples, narrowed eyes and all. But he sank back and recovered his disarming smile. "I been doing all the talking. What was it you came to see me about?"

I opened my mouth, and hesitated. To my amazement, he waited. "I just dropped up to sort of . . . ." I paused. He nodded encouragingly. "To find out about —" I began, then stopped.

"I see everybody," he confided. "Some people, now, they pick and choose who comes in. Not me.

I was at the door with my hat, which I'd picked up on the way. "Thanks for the dr—"

"Well, don't rush off."

I searched valiantly for the one word which might serve me, and found it. "Goodbye," I said, and whipped through the door. I could hear Willy Simms' muffled voice through the panel: "All right, I'll finish your drink if you're in such a damn hurry."

All the way down the stairs I could hear him, though I could no longer distinguish his words. Once he laughed. I got to the sidewalk and turned left. There was a man standing by a tree a few yards down the street, curbing a dog. "Hey," I said.

He turned toward me, raising his eyebrows. "Who—me?"

I tapped his shoulder with my left index finger. "New York would have the largest telephone book in the world," I said, "if they didn't have to break it into five sections."

He said, "Huh?"

"Don't mind me," I told him, "I just wanted to see if I could say a whole sentence all the way through." I tipped my hat and walked on. At the corner I looked back. He was still standing there, staring at me. When he saw me turn he called, "Whaddaya—wise?" I just waved at him and went home.

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* * *

"Beck," I said into the phone, "I want to see you."

"Sure," he said. "You're coming over Saturday, aren't you?"

"Uh . . . yes. But I want to see you before that."

"It'll wait," he said easily.

"No, it won't," I said. There must have been something special in my voice because he asked me if anything was the matter.

"I don't know, Beck," I said honestly. "I mean, something is, but I don't know what." I had an idea suddenly. "Beck, can I bring someone to the party?"

"You know you can, Tom. Anyone you like."

"My brother-in-law Hank."

There was a long silence at the other end. Then, in a slightly strained voice, Beck said, "Why him?"

"Why not?"

The silence again. Then, as if he had had a brainwave, Beck said easily, "No reason. If he wants to come, bring him."

"Thanks. Now, about seeing you before. How about tonight?"

"Tom, I'd love to, but I'm tied up. It'll wait till Saturday, won't it?"

"No," I said. "Tomorrow?"

"I'm out of town tomorrow. I'm really very sorry, Tom."

Abruptly, I said, "It's about the lowest common denominator."

"What?"

"Your parties," I said patiently. "The people who go to them."

He laughed suddenly. "The one thing they have in common is that they have nothing in common."

"That I know," I said. "I meant the people who used to go to your parties and don't any more."

The silence, but much shorter this time. "I'm looking at my book," he said. "Maybe I could squeeze in a few minutes with you tomorrow."

"What time?" I said, keeping the humorless grin out of my voice.

"Two o'clock. Kelly's all right?"

"At the bar. I'll be there, Beck, and thanks."

I hung up and scratched my chin. Lowest common denominator?

Hank's phrase, that was. Hank. The guy who'd put me on to this weird business. The guy who'd told me that if things happened to you at Beck's parties, you didn't go back. The guy who said *he* was never going back.

And wouldn't say why.

Well, if I had anything to do with it he'd be back.

Opie, Lila Falsehaven, Klaus, Willy Simms, Hank. Each had done something they shouldn't—maybe *couldn't* was the word—have done. Each would not—could not?—go back. Sometimes

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the thing was just silly, like Lila Falsehaven's dirty story. Sometimes it was deadly, like Klaus's crazy break.

Well, I told myself, keep plugging at it. Get enough case histories and a basic law will show itself. Avogadro worked up a fine theory about the behavior of gas molecules because he had enough molecules to work with. Sociologists struggle toward theories without enough numbers to work with, and they make some sort of progress. If I worked hard enough and lived long enough, maybe I could pile up a couple hundred million case histories of people who didn't go to Beck's parties any more, and come out with an answer.

Meanwhile, I'd better talk to Hank.

THIS time I went to his office and closed the door. He picked up the phone and said, "Sue, don't ring this thing until I tell you .... I know, I *know*. I don't care. Tell him to wait." Then he just lounged back and looked at me.

"Hank," I said, "about this assignment. How much are you willing to help me?"

"All the way."

"Okay," I said. "Saturday night you have a date."

"I have? Where?"

"Beck's."

He sat upright, his eyes still on my face. "No."

"That's what you mean by 'all the way'?" I asked quietly.

"I said I'd help you. Me going there—that wouldn't help anything. Besides, Beck wouldn't hold still for it."

"Beck told me to bring you."

"The hell he did!"

"Look, Hank, when I tell you—

"Okay, okay, cool down, will you? I'm not calling you a liar." He pulled at his lip. "Tell me exactly what you said about it and what he said. As near as you can remember it."

I thought back. "I asked him if I could bring someone and he said sure. Then I mentioned your name and he—well, sort of hesitated. So I wanted to know why not, and he came off it right away. Said 'If he wants to come, bring him.' "

"The foxy little louse!" Hank said from between clenched teeth.

"What's the matter?"

Hank got up, smacked his fist into his palm. "He meant exactly what he said, Tom. Bring me—*if* I want to come. Conversely, if I don't want to come, don't bring me. I don't want to, Tom."

"Not even in the process of 'going all the way' to help me?" I asked sarcastically.

He said tightly, "That's right." I must have looked pretty grim, because he tried to explain. "If I could be sure it would break the case, Tom, I'd do it no matter

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what. If you can convince me that that one single act on my part is all you need, why, I'm your boy. Can you do that?"

"No," I said in all honesty. "It might help like crazy, though. All right," I conceded reluctantly. "If you don't want to go, you won't, and that's that. Now—short of that, will you help?"

"Absolutely," he said relievedly.

Then I aimed a forefinger at him and barked, "Okay. Then you'll tell me what happened to you there, and why you won't go back. You'll tell me now, and you won't even try to wriggle out of it."

It got real quiet in the office then. Hank's eyes half-closed, and I had seen that sleepy look before. Every time I had somebody had gotten himself rather badly hurt.

"I should have known better," he said after a while, "than to put a real reporter on something that concerned me. You really want that information?"

I nodded.

"Tom," he said, and his voice was almost a lazy yawn, "I'm going to punch you right in the middle of your big fat mouth."

"For asking you a businesslike question that you made my business?"

"Not exactly," Hank said. "I'm going to tell you, and you're going to laugh, and when you laugh I'm going to let you have it."

"I haven't laughed at any of this yet," I said.

"And you still want to know."

I just waited.

"All right," he said. He came around his desk, balled up his fist, and eyed my face carefully. "I went to one of Beck's parties, and right in the middle of the proceedings I wet my pants."

I bit down hard on the insides of my cheeks, but I couldn't hold it. I let out a joyful whoop. Then I caromed off the water cooler, slid eight feet on the side of my head, and brought up against the wall. A great cloud of luminous fog rolled in, swirled, then gradually began to clear. I sat up. There was blood on my mouth and chin. Hank was standing over me, looking very sad. He dropped a clean handkerchief where I could reach it. I used it, then got my feet under me.

"Damn it, Tom, I'm sorry," he said. The way he said it I believed him. "But you shouldn't've laughed. I told you you shouldn't."

I went to the deskside chair and sat down. Hank drew me some water and brought it over. "Dip the handkerchief," he ordered. "Tom, this'll make more sense to you when you have a chance to think it over. Why don't you cut out?"

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"I don't have to, I guess," I said with difficulty. "I guess if a think like that happened to . . . ."

"If it happened," Hank said soberly, "it wouldn't be funny, and God help the man who laughed at it. It would shake your confidence like nothing else could. You'd think of it suddenly in a bus, at a board-meeting, in the composing room. You'd think of it when you were tramping up and down the office dictating. You'd remember that when it happened it came without warning and there was nothing you could do about it until it was over. It would be the kind of thing that just couldn't happen—and forever after you'd be afraid of its happening again."

"And the last place in the world you'd go back to is the place where it happened."

"I'd go through hell first," he said, his voice thick, like taking a vow. "And . . . just to cap it, that damned Beck—"

"He laughed?"

"He did not," said Hank viciously. "All he did was meet me at the door when I was escaping, and tell me I'd do just as well not to come again. He was polite enough, I guess, but he meant it."

I dunked the handkerchief again and leaned over the glass desktop, where I could see my reflection. I mopped at my chin. "This Beck," I said. "He certainly makes sure. Hank, all the other people who used to go to Beck's and don't any more . . . do you suppose Beck told them all not to come back?"

"I never thought of it. Probably so. Except maybe Klaus. He wasn't going anywhere after what he did."

"I saw Willy Simms," I told him. "He acted mad at Beck, and said something about going there again being as impossible as writing another song. He's tone deaf, you know."

"I didn't know. What about Miss Falsehaven? Did you see her?"

"She wouldn't be seen dead in the place. She's half crazy with the memory of what she did. To you or me, that would be nothing. To her it was the end of the world."

The end of the world. The end of the world. "Hank, I'm just dimly beginning to understand what you meant about . . . Opie. That what she did wasn't her doing." Suddenly, shockingly—I believe I was more startled than Hank—I bellowed, "But it was in her to do it! There had to be that one grain of—of whatever it took!"

"Maybe, maybe . . . ," he said gently. "I'd like to think not, though. I'd like to think there is something there at Beck's that puts the bee in people's bonnets. An alien bee, one that couldn't

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under any other circumstances exist with that person." He blushed. "I'd feel better if I could prove that."

"I got to get out of here. I'm meeting Beck," I said, after a glance at his desk clock.

"Are you now?" He sat down again. "Give him my regards."

I started out. "Tom—"

"Well?"

"I'm sorry I had to hit you. I had to. See?"

"Sure I see," I said, and when I grinned it hurt. "If I didn't see, they'd be mixing a cast for your busted back by now." I went out.

BECK was waiting for me when I rushed into Kelly's. I picked up his drink and started back to the corner.

"Not a table," he bleated, following me. "I have a train to catch, Tom. I told you that."

"Come on," I said. "This won't take but a minute." He came, grumbling, and he let me maneuver him into the upholstered corner of a booth. I sat down where he'd have to climb over me if the conversation should make him too impulsive.

"Sorry I'm late, Beck. But I'm glad you're in a hurry. I won't have to beat about the bush."

"What's on your mind?" he said, irritatingly looking at his watch and, for a moment, closing his eyes as he calculated the minutes.

"Where's your money come from?" I asked bluntly.

"Why, it—well, really, Tom. You've never—I mean—" He shifted gears and began to get stuffy. "I'm not used to being catechized about my personal affairs, old man. We are old friends, yes, but after all—"

"Shove it," I said. "I'm the boy who knew you when, remember? We roomed together in college, and unless my memory fails me it was State College, as near to being a public school as you can find these days. We had three neckties and one good blanket between us for more than two years, and skipped forty-cent lunches for date money. That wasn't so long ago, Beck. You graduated into pushing a pen for an insurance company—right? And when you left it you never took another job. But here you are with a big ugly house full of big ugly furniture, a rumpus room by Hilton out of Tropics, and a passion for throwing big noisy parties every week."

"May I ask," he said between his protruding front teeth, "why you are so suddenly interested?"

"You look more than ever like a gopher," I said detachedly, figuring it wouldn't hurt to make him mad. He always blurts things when he's mad enough. "Now, Beck—working around a magazine like ours, we get a lot of advance stuff about things

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that are about to break. I'm just trying to do you a favor, son."

"I don't see—"

"How would you make out," I asked, "if they dragged out your income tax returns for the last four years and balanced them against your real property?"

"I'd make out nicely," he said smugly. "If you must know, my income comes from investments. I've done very well indeed."

"What did you use for capital in the first place?"

"That's really none of your business, Tom," he said briskly, and I almost admired him for the way he stood up to me. "But I might remind you that you need very little capital to enter the market, and if you can buy low and sell high just a few times in a row, you don't have to worry about capital."

"You're not a speculator, Beck," I snorted, "Not *you!* Why I never figured you had the sense to pour mud out of a helmet. Who's your tipster?"

For some reason, that hit him harder than anything else I'd said. "You're being very annoying," he said prissily, "and you're going to make me miss my train. I'll have to leave now. I don't know what's gotten into you, Tom. I don't much care for this kind of thing, and I'm sure I don't know what this is all about.'

"I'll go with you," I said, "and explain the whole thing."

"You needn't bother," he snapped. He got up, and so did I. I let him out from behind the table and followed him to the door. The hat check girl rummaged around and found a pigskin suitcase for him. I took it from her before he could get a hand on it. "Give me that!" he yelled.

"Don't stand here and argue," I said urgently. "You'll be late," I barreled on out to the curb and whistled. I whistle pretty well. Cabs stopped three blocks in every direction. I shoved him into the nearest one and climbed in after him. "You know you could never catch a cab like I can," I said. "I just want to help."

"Central Depot," Beck said to the driver. "Tom, what are you after? I've never seen you like this."

"Just trying to help," I said. "A lot of people starting to talk about you, Beck."

He paled. "Really?"

"Oh, yes. What do you expect: hidden income, big parties that anyone can come to, and all?"

"Lot of people have parties."

"Nobody talks about them afterward the way they do about yours."

"What are they saying, Tom?" He hated to be conspicuous.

"Why did you tell Willy Simms never to show his face at your house again?" It was a shot in the dark, but the bell rang.

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"I think I was quite reasonable with him," Beck protested. "He talks all the time, and he bored me. He bored everybody, every time he came."

"He still talks all the time," I said mysteriously, and dropped that part of it. Beck began to squirm. "Personally, I think you get something from the people who come to those brawls. And once you've gotten it, you drop them."

Beck leaned forward to speak to the driver, but for some reason his voice wouldn't work. He coughed and tried again. "Faster, driver."

"So what I want to know is, what do you get from those people, and how do you get it?"

"I don't know what you mean, and I don't see how any of this concerns you."

"Something happened to my wife last Saturday."

"Oh," he said. "Oh, dear." Then, "Well, what do you suppose I got from her?"

I put my hands behind me, lifted up, and sat on them. "I know you awful well," I grated, "which fact just saved your life. You don't mean what you just said, old man, do you?"

He went quite white. "Oh, good heavens, Tom, no! No! It was what you said before—that I got something out of every one of these people. I'm more sorry than I can say about—about Opie—I couldn't help it, you know, I was busy, there was a lot to do, there always is. . . . No, Tom, I didn't mean that the way you thought."

He didn't, either. Not Beck. There were some things that were just not in Beck's department. I took a deep, head-clearing breath and asked, "Why did you tell Hank not to come back?"

"I'd rather not say exactly," he said, pleading and sincere. "It was for his own benefit, though. He . . . er . . . made rather a fool of himself. I thought it would be a kindness if he could be angry at me instead of at himself."

I gave him a long careful look. He had never been very smart, but he had always been as glib as floor wax. The cab turned into the station ramp just then, so I came up with the big question. "Beck, does everybody who goes to your parties sooner or later make a fool of himself?"

"Oh dear no," he said, and I think if he had not been looking at his watch and worrying, he would never have said what came out. "Some people are immune."

The cab stopped and he got out. "I'll take it," I said when his hand went for his pocket. "You better run." I hung my head out the window, watching him, waiting, wondering if it would come, even after all this. And it came.

From fifty feet away he called

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over his shoulder, "See you Saturday, Tom!"

"Kelly's," I told the cabbie, and settled back.

So. I couldn't make Beck so mad he'd exclude me from one of his parties—and somehow or other the rich and dumb and smart and stupid and ugly and big and famous and nowhere people who came there became prone to making fools of themselves—and Beck got something out of it when they did—and what did he want out of me? And what did he mean by "some people are immune"? Immune . . . That was a peculiar word to use. Immune. There was something in that house—in that room—that made people do things that—Wait a minute. Hank and Miss Falsehaven and, if you wanted to be broad about it, Opie—they had indeed made fools of themselves. But the guy who killed the preacher with Beck's poker—and Klaus the spy—that wasn't what you'd call foolishness. And then Willy Simms. Is the creation of a hit song foolishness?

Lowest common denominator . . . .

I paid off the cab and went in to Kelly's to double the drink I'd missed because Beck had been in such a hurry. I was drinking the second one when some simple facts fell into place.

The next best thing to knowing what the answer is is to know where it is. Beck was on his way out of town.

There was only one single thing that connected all these crazy facts: Beck's rumpus room.

A good thing I have credit at Kelly's. I flew out of there so fast I forgot to leave anything on the bar. Except a half shot of rye.

IT wasn't quite dark when I reached Beck's, but that didn't matter. The house was set well back in its mid-city three acres. High board fences guarded the sides, and a thick English privet hid it from the street. Once I'd slipped through the gate and onto the lawn, I might as well have been underground. The house was one of those turn-of-the-century horrors, not quite chalet, not quite manse, with a little more gingerbread than the moderns like and a little less than the Victorians drooled about. It had gables and turrets and rooms scattered on slightly different levels, so that the windows looked like the holes on an IBM card.

I hefted the package I'd picked up at the hardware store on the way and, sticking close to the north hedge, worked my way cautiously around to the back.

One glance told me I couldn't do business there. The house was built at the very back of its property, and behind it ran a small street or a large alley, whichever you like. The back of the house

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hung over it like a cliff, and there was traffic and neighbors across the way. No, it would have to be a side. I cursed, because I knew the rumpus room faced the back with its huge picture windows of one-way glass; then I remembered that the room was air-conditioned; the windows wouldn't open and couldn't be cut because they were certainly double-pane jobs.

I tried two ground-floor windows, but they were locked. Another was open, but barred. Then nothing but a bare, windowless stretch. On a hunch I approached it, through the flower bed at its base. And sure enough, just at chest-height, hidden behind a phalanx of hollyhocks, was a small window.

I got out the penlite flash I'd just bought and peered in. The window was locked with one of those burglar-proof cast-steel locks that screws a rubber ferrule up against the frame. I was pleased. I got out the can of aquarium cement and worked the stuff into a cone, which I placed against the glass. Then I got out the glass cutter and scribed around the cone. I rapped the cut circle once, and with a snap it broke out, with the cone of putty holding it. I reached down and laid putty and glass on the window-sill, unscrewed the burglarproof lock, opened the window and climbed in. With my putty-knive I carefully removed the broken pane, and cracked it and the circle into small enough pieces to wrap up in the brown paper from the parcel I carried. I measured the frame and cut the one spare piece of window glass I'd brought along, and installed it using the aquarium cement. The stuff's black and doesn't glare at you the way clean, new putty does. I cleaned the new pane inside and out, shut and locked the window, and carefully swept the sill and the floor under it. I dumped the sweepings into my jacket pocket and stowed the tools here and there in my jacket and pants. So now nobody ever had to know I'd been here.

I was in a large storage closet which turned out to belong to the butler's pantry. That led to the kitchen, and that to the dining room, and now I knew where I was. I went into the front hall and down toward the back of the house. The door to the rumpus-room was closed. On this side it was all crudded up with carven wainscoting; golden oak and Ionic columns. It was a sliding door; I rolled it back and on the other side it was a flat slab of birch to match the shocking modern of the rumpus room. Again I had that strange feeling of wonderment about Beck and his single peculiarity.

I shut the door and crossed the dim room to the picture windows.

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There I touched the button that closed the heavy drapes. There was a faint hum and they began to move. As they did, all out sourceless light began to grow in the room, until when they met the room was filled with a pervasive golden glow.

And standing in the middle of the rug which I had just crossed, standing yards away from any door and a long way from any furniture, was a girl.

The shock of it was almost physical. And for a split second I thought my eyes registered a dazzle, like the subjective afterglow of a lightning flash. Then I got hold of myself and met her long, level, green-eyed gaze.

If a woman can be strong and elfin at once, she was. Her hair was blue-black with a strange reddish light in it. Her skin was too flawless, like something in a wax museum, but for all that it was real and warm-looking. She was smiling, and I could see how her teeth met edge to edge in that rarity, the perfect bite. Her lowcut dress was of a heavy gold and purple brocade, and she must have had a dozen petticoats under it. Sixteenth century—seventeenth century? In *this* room?

"That was nice," she said.

"It was?" I said stupidly.

"Yes, but it didn't last. I suppose you're immune."

"Depends," I said, looking at the neckline of her dress. Then I remembered Beck's strange remark.

She said, "You're not supposed to be here. Not all alone."

"I could say the same for you. But since we're both here, we're not alone."

"I'm not," she said. "But you are." And she laughed. "You're Conway."

"Oh. He told you about me, did he? Well, he never said a word about you."

"Of course not. He wouldn't dare."

"Do you live here?"

She nodded. "I've always lived here."

"What do you mean always? Beck's been here three—yes, it's four years now. And you've been here all this time?"

She nodded. "Since before that."

"I'll be damned," I said. "Good for Beck. I thought he didn't like women."

"He doesn't need to." I saw her gaze stray over my shoulder and fix on something behind me. I whirled. Clinging to the drape was a spider as big as a Stetson hat. I didn't know whether it was going to jump or what. With the same motion which began when I turned, I snatched up a heavy ashstand made of links of chain welded together. Before I could

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heave it the girl was beside me, holding it with both hands. "Don't, she said. "You'll break the window and people will come. I want you to stay here for awhile."

"But the—"

"It isn't real," she said. I looked and the spider was gone. I turned back to her. "What the hell goes on here?"

She sighed. "That wasn't so good," she said. "You were supposed to be frightened. But you just got angry at it. Why weren't you frightened?"

"I am now," I said, glancing at the drapes. "I guess I get mad first and scared later. What's the idea? You put that thing there, didn't you?"

She nodded.

"What for?"

"I was hungry."

"I don't get you."

"I know."

She moved to the divan, rustling wonderfully as she walked. She subsided into the foam rubber, patted the seat next to her. I crossed slowly. You don't have to know what a thing's all about to like it. I sat beside her.

She cast her eyes down and smoothed her skirt. It was as if she were waiting for something.

I didn't give her long to wait. I pulled her to me and clawed at the back of her dress. It slipped downward easily just as my cheek encountered the heavy stubble on hers.

The heavy—

With a shout I sprang back, goggle-eyed. There on the couch sprawled a heavy-set man with bad teeth and a four-day beard. He roared with rich baritone laughter.

You don't have to understand a situation to dislike it. I stepped forward and let loose with my Sunday punch. It travels from my lower rib to straight ahead, and by the time it gets where it's going it has all of me behind it. But this time it didn't get anywhere. My elbow crackled from the strain as my fist connected with nothing at all. But from the seat of the divan came a large black cat. It leaped to the floor and streaked across the room. I fell heavily onto the divan, bounced off, and rushed the animal. It doubled back at the end of the room, eluded my grasping fingers easily, and the next thing I knew it was climbing the drapes, hand over hand.

Yes, hands; the cat had three-fingered hands and an opposed thumb.

When it got up about fifteen feet it tucked itself into a round ball and—I think *spun* is the word for it. I shook my head to clear it and looked again. There was no sign of the animal; there was only a speaker baffle I had not noticed before.

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Speaker baffle?

Anyone who knows ultramodern knows there's a convention against speakers or lights showing. Everything has to be concealed or to look like something else.

"That," said the speaker in a sexless, toneless voice, "was more like it."

I backed away and sank down on the divan, where I could watch the baffle.

"Even if you are immune, I can get something out of you."

I said, "How do you mean immune?"

"There is nothing you wouldn't do," said the impersonal voice. "Now, when I make somebody do something he *can't* do—then I feed. All I can do with you is make you mad. Even then, you're not mad at yourself at all. Just the girl or the spider or whatever else."

I suddenly realized the speaker wasn't there any more. However, a large spotted snake was on the rug near my feet. I dived on it, found in my hand the ankle of the girl I had seen before. I backed off and sat down again. "See?" she said in her velvet voice. "You don't even scare much now."

"I won't scare at all," I said positively.

"I suppose not," she said regretfully. Then she brightened. "But it's almost Saturday. *Then* I'll feed."

"What are you, anyhow?"

She shrugged. "You haven't a name for it. How could a thing like me have a name anyhow? I can be anything I like."

"Stay this way for a while." I looked her up and down. "I like you fine this way. Why don't you come over here and be friendly?"

She stepped back a pace, shaking her head.

"Why not? It wouldn't matter to you."

"That's right. I won't though. You see, it wouldn't matter to you."

"I don't get you."

She said patiently, "In your position, some men wouldn't want me. Some would in spite of themselves, and when they found out what I was—or what I *wasn't*—they'd hate themselves for it. That I could use," she crooned, and licked her full lips. "But you—you want me the way I am right now, and it doesn't matter in the least to you that I might be reptile, insect, or just plain hypocrite, as long as you get what you want."

"Wait a minute—this feeding. You feed on—hate?"

"Oh, no. Look, when a human being does something he's incapable of, like—oh, that old biddy who clawed the pretty actress—there's a glandular reaction set up that's unlike any other. All humans have a drive to live and a drive to die—a drive to

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build and a drive to destroy. In most people they're shaken down pretty well. But what I do is to give them a big charge of one or the other, so the two parts are thrown into conflict. That conflict creates a—call it a field, an aura. That's what feeds me. Now do you see?"

"Sort of like the way a mosquito injects a dilutant into the blood." I looked at her. "You're a parasite."

"If you like," she said detachedly. "So are you, if you define parasitism as sustaining oneself from other life-forms."

"Now tell me about the immunity."

"Oh, that. Very annoying. Like being hungry and finding you have nothing but canned food and no opener. You know it's there but you can't get to it. It's quite simple. You're immune because you're capable of anything—anything at all."

"Like Superman?"

She curled her lip. "You? No, I'm sorry."

"What then?"

She was thoughtful. "Do you remember asking me what I was? Well, down through your history there have been a lot of names for such as I. All wrong, of course. But the one that's used most often is *conscience*. A man's natural conscience tells him when he's done wrong. But any time you see a case of a man's conscience working on him, trying to destroy him—you can bet one of us has been around. Any time you see a man doing something utterly outside all his background and conditioning—you can be sure one of us is there with him."

I was beginning to understand a whole lot of things. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"Why not? I like to talk, same as you do. It can't do any harm. No one would believe you. After a while you yourself won't believe anything I've told you. Humans *can't* believe in things that have no set size or shape or weight or behavior. If an extra fly buzzes around your table; if your morning-glory vine has a new shoot it lacked ten minutes ago—you wouldn't believe it. These things happen around all humans all the time, and they never notice. They explain everything in terms of what they already believe. Since they never believe in anything remotely resembling us, we are free to pass and repass in front of their silly eyes, feeding when and where we want. . . ."

"You can't get away with it. Humans will catch up with you," I blurted. "Humans are learning to think in new ways. Did you ever hear of non-Euclidean geometry? Do you know anything about non-Aristotelian systems?"

She laughed. "We know about

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them. But by the time they are generally accepted, we'll no longer be parasites. We'll be symbiotes. Some of us already are. I am."

"Symbiotes? You mean you depend on another life-form?"

"And it depends on me."

"What does?"

She indicated the incongruous room. "Your silly friend Beck, of course. Some of the people who are attracted to the feeding-grounds here are operators—very shrewd. The last thing in the world they would ever do is to pass on investment secrets to anyone. I see to it that they tell Beck. And oh, *how* they regret it! How *foolish* they feel! And how I feed! In exchange, Beck brings them here."

"I *knew* he couldn't do it by himself!" I said. "Now tell me—why does he have me hanging around here all the time?"

"My doing." She looked at me cooly. "One day I'm going to eat you. One day I'll find that can-opener. I'll learn how to slam a door on you, or pound you with a flatiron, and I'll eat you like candy."

I laughed at her. "You'll have to find something I'll regret doing first."

"There has to be something." She yawned. "I have to work up a new edge to my appetite," she said lazily. "Go away."

She's wrong," Hank said, when I'd finished telling him the story. He'd galloped over to my place when I called and just let me talk.

"Wrong how?"

"She said it was impossible for a human to believe this. Well, by God I do."

"I think I do myself," I said. Then, "Why?"

"Why?" Hank repeated. He gave a thoughtful pull to his lower lip. "Maybe it's just because I want to believe in any theory that keeps Opie clean—that makes what she did really out of character."

"Opie," I said. "Yes."

He gave me a swift look. "Something I've been thinking about, Tom. That night it happened—with Opie, I mean . . . ."

"Spill it if it bothers you," I said, recognizing the expression.

'Thanks, Tom. Well . . . no matter what Opie was suffering from, no matter how . . . uh . . . willing she might have been—these things take time. You can see them happening."

"So?"

"*Where were you when that guy started making passes at her?*"

I thought. I started to smile, cut it off. Then I got mad. "I don't remember."

"Yes you do. Where were you, Tom?"

"Around."

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"You weren't even in the room."

"I wasn't?"

"No."

"Who told you?"

"You did," he said. He began to get that sleepy look. "You're a lousy liar, Tom. When you duck a question, you're saying yes. Who was the babe, Tom?"

"I don't know."

"*What?*"

"I said I don't know," I said sullenly. "Just a babe."

"Oh. You didn't ask her her name."

"Guess not."

"And you raised all that fuss about Opie."

"You leave Opie out of this!" I blazed. "There's a big difference."

"You ought to be hung by your thumbs," he said pityingly. "But I guess it isn't your fault." He snorted. "No wonder that parasite of Beck's can't reach you. You don't do anything you regret because you never regret anything you do. Not one thing!"

"Well, why not?" I jumped to my feet. "Listen, Hank, I'm alive, see. I'm alive all over. Everybody I know is killing off this part of themselves, that part of themselves—parts that get hungry get starved, they die. Don't drink this, don't look at that, don't eat the other, when all the time something in you is hungry for these things. It's easily fed—and once it's fed it's quiet. I'm alive, damn it, and I mean to stay alive!"

Hank went to the door. "I'm getting out of here," he said in a shaking voice. "I got to think of my sister. I don't want you to get hurt. She might not forgive me."

He slammed the door. I kicked the end-table and busted a leg off it. The door opened again. Hank said, "I'm going with you to Beck's Saturday night. I'll pick you up here. Don't leave until I get here."

The front door at Beck's stood wide, as it always did on Saturdays. There was nothing to stop Hank or any other "graduate" from walking right in. Unless the something was inside those people. Hank sure felt it; I could tell by the way he jammed his hands in his pockets and sauntered through the door. He looked so relaxed, but he radiated tension.

It was the usual unusual type of party. Beck self-effacingly rode herd on about nineteen of the goofiest assortment of people ever collected—since last week. A famous lady economist. An alderman. A pimply Leftist. A brace of German tourists, binoculars and all. A dazed-looking farmer in store-clothes. Somebody playing piano. Somebody looking adoringly at the piano-player—she obviously didn't

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play. Somebody else looking disgustedly at the piano-player. He obviously did play.

When we came in, Beck hurried over, chortling greetings, which dried up completely when he recognized Hank. "Hank," he gasped. "Really, old man, I think—"

"Hiya, Beck," Hank said. "Been quite a while." He walked out into the room and to the bar in the far corner. Beck gawped like a bleached haddock. "Tom," Beck said, "you shouldn't have taken a chance like—"

"I'm just as thirsty as he is," I told him, and followed Hank.

I got a rye. "Hank."

"What?" His eyes were on the crowd.

'When are you going to quit the silent treatment and tell me what you have in mind?"

He looked at me, and the strain he was under must have been painful. "Hey," I said, "take it easy. Nothing's going to happen to you. Our hungry little friend here is an epicure. I don't think she's interested in anything but the first rush of anguish she kicks up. You're old stuff."

"I know," he muttered. "I know . . . I guess." He wiped his forehead. "Do you see her?"

"No," I said. "But then, how would I know her if I did see her? Maybe she's not in the room."

"I think she is," he said. "I think she's stuck here."

"That's a thought. Hey! Her specialty is the incongruous—right? The out-of-character. Well, that's what this room is all about."

He nodded. "That's what I mean. And that's what I'm going to check on, but for sure. Here."

He moved close to the bar and to me, and quickly and secretly passed me something chunky and flat. "Hank!" I whispered. "A gun! What—"

"Take it. I have one too. Follow my cue when the time comes."

I don't like guns. But it was in my pocket before I could make any more talk. I wondered if Hank had gone off his rocker. "Bullets wouldn't make no never-mind to her."

"They aren't for her," he said, watching the crowd again.

"But—"

"Shut up. Tom," he asked abruptly, "does somebody always do something crazy at these shindigs? Every time?"

I remembered about the "investment" tips, the number of quiet, unnoticed times people must have done things in this room that caused them humiliation, regret. "Maybe so, Hank."

"Early or late in the proceedings?"

"That I don't know, Hank. I really don't."

"I can't wait," he muttered. "I can't risk it. Maybe it only feeds once. Here I go," he said clearly.

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I called to him, but he put his chin down between his collarbones and went to the piano. I flashed a look around. I remember Beck's face watching Hank was white and strained.

Hank climbed right up on the piano, one foot on the bench, one foot on the keys, both big feet on the exquisite finish of the top. The pianist faltered and stopped. The ardent girl watching him squeaked. People looked. People rushed to finish a sentence while they turned. Others didn't even notice. After all—those parties of Beck's . . . .

"Parasite!" Hank bellowed. And do you know, four-fifths of that crowd practically snapped to attention.

"He's not immune," Hank said. He was talking, apparently, to the place where the wall met the ceiling. "Here's your can-opener, parasite. Listen to me."

He paused, and in the sudden embarrassed silence Beck's voice came shakingly, stretched and gasping. "Get off there, you hear? Get—"

Hank pulled out his gun. "Shut up, Beck." Beck sat right down on the floor. Hank lifted his big head. "All he wants to do is live. He'd hate to die. But how do you suppose he'd feel if he killed himself?"

There shouldn't be silences like that. But it didn't last long. Somebody whimpered. Somebody shuffled. And then, in that voice I had heard here before, on the crazy day I saw the spider and the cat with hands, I heard a single syllable.

Starve a man for a day and a half, then put a piece of charcoal-crusted, juicy-pink steak in his mouth. Set out glasses of a rough red wine, and secretly substitute a vintage burgundy in one man's glass. Drop a silky mink over the shoulders of a shabby girl as she stands in front of a mirror. Do any of these things and you'll hear that sound, starting suddenly, falling in pitch, turning to a sigh, then a breath.

"M-m-m-m-m . . . !"

"You won't have long to take it, but it doesn't take long, does it?" asked Hank.

I thought, what the hell is he talking about? Who?

And then I pulled the gun out of my pocket.

Now I've got to talk about how much can run through a man's mind, how fast. In the time it took to raise the gun and aim it and pull the trigger, I thought:

It's Tom Conway he's been talking about to the parasite.

Hank wants the parasite to take me.

It's the parasite, not Hank, not I, who is raising this gun, aiming it.

This is Hank's way to avenge himself on me. And why vengeance? Only because I think

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differently from him. Doesn't Hank know that to me my thinking is right and needs no excuse?

And it's a stupid vengeance, because it's on Opie's behalf, and surely Opie wouldn't want it; certainly it can't benefit her.

The gun was aimed at my temple and I pulled the trigger.

I'm alive, I'm alive all over. Everybody has to die sometime, but oh, the stupid, stupid, sick realization that you did it to yourself! That you let yourself be killed, that you let your own finger tighten on the trigger.

A gunshot is staccato, sharp, short. This was different. This was a sound that started with a gunshot but sustained itself; it was a roar, it filled the world. It roared and roared while the room hazed over, spun, turned on its side as my cheek thumped the carpet. The roar went on and on while the light faded, and through it I could hear their screams, and Hank's voice, distant but clear. "Everybody out! This place is going to blow sky-high." "Fire!" he shouted a second later. "Fire!" And, *"Beck, damn you, help me with Tom."*

Nothing then but a sense of time passing, then cool air, darkness, and a moment of lucidity. I saw too clearly, heard too well. Everything hurt. The roar was still going on as a background, I heard the gunshot, tasted it bitterly, saw it as a flickering aurora in and of everything around me, smelled it acrid and sharp—and felt it. I was on the gravel path, and frightened people poured out of the house.

"Stay with him!" Hank roared, and my head was cradled on Beck's trembling knees.

"But there is no fire—no fire," Beck quavered.

And Hank was a black bulk in blackness, and his voice was distant as he raced to the bushes. "Wait," he said. "Wait." He stooped back there, and there was a dull explosion inside the house, and another, and white light showed in the downstairs windows, turned to yellow, flickered and grew.

Hank came back. "There's a fire," he said.

Beck screamed. "You'll kill it!" He tried to rise. Hank caught his shirt and held him down.

"Yes, I'll kill it, you Judas!"

"You don't understand," Beck cried "I can't live without it."

"Go back to your insurance company job. Make your own way, and don't harvest better people than yourself to feed monsters." Flames shot from the second-story windows. "But if you really can't live without it—die," said Hank, and then he shouted, "Is everybody out?"

"All accounted for," called a voice. I remember thinking then

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that if they had counted heads and all were safe—who was that screaming in the fire?

After that even the roar stopped.

First pain, and then enough light to filter through my closed lids. I tried to move my right hand and failed. I opened my eyes and saw the cast on my right forearm. I turned my head.

"Tom?"

I looked up at the speaking blur. Then it wasn't a blur, it was Hank.

"You're all right now, Tom. You're home. My house.

I turned from him and looked at the ceiling, the window, then back to him. "You tried to kill me," I said.

He shook his head. "I used you for bait. I had to know if it was in that room. I had to know if it would feed. I had to know what it could do, what it would do. I tried to shoot the gun out of your hand. I missed, and hit your forearm. It's broken. Your bullet creased your scalp. It was awful close, Tom."

"Suppose I'd killed myself?"

He said, "Bait is expendable."

"You booby-trapped the house, didn't you?"

"After your blow-by-blow instruction in burglary, it was no trouble."

"You tried to kill me," I said.

"I didn't," he said with finality.

I wondered—I really wondered—why what I had done was that important. And it was as if Hank read my mind. "It's because of the difference between you and Opie," he said. "Superficially, you and Opie did exactly the same thing that night.

But Opie's own feelings about it will cost her something for the rest of her life. And you didn't even remember who you were with."

I lay there like a block of wood. Hank went away. Maybe I slept. Next thing I knew, Opie was there, kneeling by the bed.

"Tom," she said brokenly. "Oh, Tom, I wish I were dead. Tom," she said, "I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you . . . ."

I thought, I wish that thing, whatever it was, hadn't died in the fire. I know what I am now, I thought. I'm immune. And knowing that gives me enough anguish to feed the likes of you for a thousand years.

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Illustrator: Frank R. Paul

THE WORM

By DAVID H. KELLER, M.D.

Back in the late 1920's and throughout the 1930's, whenever the name David H. Keller, M.D., appeared on the cover of a science-fiction or a fantasy magazine (such as Amazing Stories *or* Weird Tales*), readers turned quickly to the latest "Kelleryarn," as they were affectionately called; for they knew that while the flashier scientific speculation of his contemporaries might dazzle them for a time, the Good Doctor's deceptively simple style and his almost pedestrian pace would bore deeper into their memories than most writers ever could. And they were right, of course, because no matter how many times we read some of Keller's unforgettable yarns—like "The Thing in the Cellar," "The Revolt of the Pedestrians," "Unto Us a Child Is Born," and "A Piece of Linoleum"—we feel that something familiar, yet something strange and wonderful, is going on deep down on that shadowy level of the imagination from which writers like Keller fetch tales like "The Worm."*

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THE miller patted his dog on the head, as he whispered: "We are going to stay here. Our folks, your ancestors and mine, have been here for nearly two hundred years, and queer it would be to leave now because of fear."

The grist mill stood, a solid stone structure, in an isolated Vermont valley. Years ago every day had been a busy one for the mill and the miller, but now only the mill wheel was busy. There was no grist for the mill and no one lived in the valley. Blackberries and hazel grew where once the pastures had been green. The hand of time had passed over the farms, and the only folk left were sleeping in the churchyard. A family of squirrels nested in the pulpit, while on the tombstones silent snails left their cryptic messages in silvery streaks. Thompson's Valley was being handed back to nature. Only the old bachelor miller, John Staples, remained. He was too proud and too stubborn to do anything else.

The mill was his home, even as it had served all of his family for a home during the last two hundred years. The first Staples had built it to stay, and it was still as strong as on the day it was finished. There was a basement for the machinery of the mill, the first floor was the place of grinding and storage, and the upper two floors served as the Staples homestead. The building was warm in winter and cool in summer. Times past it had sheltered a dozen Stapleses at a time; now it provided a home for John Staples and his dog.

He lived there with his books and his memories. He had no friends and desired no associates. Once a year he went to the nearest town and bought supplies of all kinds, paying for them in gold. It was supposed that he was wealthy. Rumor credited him with being a miser. He attended to his own business, asked the world to do the same, and on a winter's evening laughed silently over Burton and Rabelais, while his dog chased rabbits in his heated sleep upon the hearth.

The winter of 1935 was beginning to threaten the valley, but with an abundance of food and wood in the mill, the recluse looked forward to a comfortable period of desuetude. No matter how cold the weather, he was warm and contented. With the inherent ability of his family, he had been able to convert the water power into electricity. When the wheel was frozen, he used the electricity stored in his storage batteries. Every day he puttered around among the machinery which it was his pride to keep in perfect order. He assured the dog that if business ever did come to the mill, he would be ready for it.

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It was on Christmas Day of that winter that he first heard the noise. Going down to the basement to see that nothing had been injured by the bitter freeze of the night before, his attention was attracted, even while descending the stone steps, by a peculiar grinding noise that seemed to come from out of the ground. His ancestors, building for permanency, had not only put in solid foundations, but had paved the entire basement with slate flagstones three feet wide and as many inches thick. Between these the dust of two centuries had gathered and hardened.

Once his feet were on this pavement, Staples found that he could not only hear the noise, but he could also feel through the flagstones the vibrations which accompanied it. Even through his heavy leather boots he could feel the rhythmic pulsations. Pulling off his mittens, he stooped over and put his finger tips on the stone. To his surprise it was warm in spite of the fact that the temperature had been below zero the night before. The vibration was more distinct to his fingertips than it had been to his feet. Puzzled, he threw himself on the slate stone and put his ear to the warm surface.

The sound he now heard made him think of the grinding of the mill stones when he was a boy and the farmers had brought corn to be ground into meal. There had been no corn meal ground in the mill for fifty years, yet here was the sound of stone scraping slowly and regularly on stone. He could not understand it. In fact, it was some time before he tried to explain it. With the habit born of years of solitary thinking, he first collected all the available facts about this noise. He knew that during the long winter evenings he would have time enough to do his thinking.

Going to his sitting room, he secured a walking stick of ash and went back to the cellar. Holding the handle of the cane lightly, he placed the other end on a hundred different spots on the floor, and each time he held it long enough to determine the presence or absence of vibration. To his surprise he found that while it varied in strength, it was present all over the cellar with the exception of the four corners. The maximum intensity was about in the center.

That evening he concentrated on the problem before him. He had been told by his grandfather that the mill was built on solid rock. As a young man he had helped clean out a well near the mill and recalled that, instead of being dug out of gravel or dirt, it had the appearance of being drilled out of solid granite. There

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was no difficulty in believing that the earth under the mill was also solid rock. There was no reason for thinking otherwise. Evidently some of these strata of stone had become loose and were slipping and twisting under the mill. The simplest explanation was the most reasonable: it was simply a geological phenomenon. The behavior of the dog, however, was not so easily explained. He had refused to go with his master into the cellar, and now, instead of sleeping in comfort before the fire, he was in an attitude of strained expectancy. He did not bark, or even whine, but crept silently to his master's chair, looking at him anxiously.

The next morning the noise was louder. Staples heard it in his bed, and at first he thought that some bold adventurer had come into the forest and was sawing down a tree. That was what it sounded like, only softer and longer in its rhythm. Buzzzzzz—Buzzzzz-Buzzzzzz. The dog, distinctly unhappy, jumped up on the bed and crawled uneasily so he could nuzzle the man's hand.

Through the four legs of the bed, Staples could feel the same vibration that had come to him through the handle of his cane the day before. That made him think. The vibration was now powerful enough to be appreciated, not through a walking stick, but through the walls of the building. The noise could be heard as well on the third floor as in the cellar.

He tried to fancy what it sounded like—not what it was—but what it was like. The first idea had been that it resembled a saw going through oak; then came the thought of bees swarming, only these were large bees and millions of them; but finally all he could think of was the grinding of stones in a grist mill, the upper stone against the lower; and now the sound was Grrrrrrrr—Grrrrrrrrr instead of Bzzzzzzzzz or Hummmmmmmm.

That morning he took longer than usual to shave and was more methodical than was his wont in preparing breakfast for himself and the dog. It seemed as though he knew that sometime he would have to go down into the cellar but wanted to postpone it as long as he could. In fact, he finally put on his coat and beaver hat and mittens and walked outdoors before he went to the basement. Followed by the dog, who seemed happy for the first time in hours, he walked out on the frozen ground and made a circle around the building he called his home. Without knowing it, he was trying to get away from the noise, to go somewhere he could walk without feeling that peculiar tingling.

Finally he went into the mill

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and started down the steps to the cellar. The dog hesitated on the top step, went down two steps and then jumped back to the top step, where he started to whine. Staples went steadily down the steps, but the dog's behavior did not add to his peace of mind. The noise was much louder than it was the day before, and he did not need a cane to detect the vibration—the whole building was shaking. He sat down on the third step from the bottom and thought the problem over before he ventured out on the floor. He was especially interested in an empty barrel which was dancing around the middle of the floor.

The power of the mill-wheel was transferred through a simple series of shafts, cogs, and leather belting to the grinding elements on the first floor. All this machinery for transmitting power was in the basement. The actual grinding had been done on the first floor. The weight of all this machinery, as well as of the heavy millstones on the first floor, was carried entirely by the flooring of the basement. The celing of the first floor was built on long pine beams which stretched across the entire building and were sunk into the stone walls at either side.

Staples started to walk around on the slate flagstones when he observed something that made him decide to stay on the steps. The floor was beginning to sink in the middle; not much, but enough to cause some of the shafts to separate from the ceiling. The ceiling seemed to sag. He saw that light objects like the empty barrel were congregating at the middle of the cellar. There was not much light but he was easily able to see that the floor was no longer level; that it was becoming saucer-shaped. The grinding noise grew louder. The steps he sat on were of solid masonry, stoutly connected with and a part of the wall. These shared in the general vibration. The whole building began to sing like a 'cello.

One day he had been to the city and heard an orchestra play. He had been interested in the large violins, especially the one that was so large the player had to stay on his feet to play it. The feeling of the stone step under him reminded him of the notes of this violin the few times it had been played by itself. He sat there. Suddenly he started, realizing that in a few more minutes he would be asleep. He was not frightened but in some dim way he knew that he must not go to sleep—not here. Whistling, he ran up the steps to get his electric torch. With that in his hand, he went back to the steps. Aided by the steady light, he saw that several large cracks had appeared in the floor and that some of the

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stones, broken loose from their fellows, were moving slowly in a drunken, meaningless way. He looked at his watch. It was only a little after nine.

And then the noise stopped.

No more noise! No more vibration! Just a broken floor and every bit of the machinery of the mill disabled and twisted. In the middle of the floor was a hole where one of the pavement stones had dropped through. Staples carefully walked across and threw the light down this hole. Then he lay down and carefully put himself in such a position that he could look down the hole. He began to sweat. There did not seem to be any bottom!

Back on the solid steps he tried to give that hole its proper value. He could not understand it, but he did not need the whining of the dog to tell him what to do. That hole must be closed as soon as possible.

Like a flash the method of doing so came to him. On the floor above he had cement. There were hundreds of grain sacks. Water was plentiful in the mill race. All that day he worked, carefully closing the hole with a great stopper of bags and wire. Then he placed timbers above and finally covered it all with cement, rich cement. Night came and he still worked. Morning came and still he staggered down the steps, each time with a bag of crushed stone or cement on his shoulder, or with two buckets of water in his hands. At noon the next day the floor was no longer concave but convex. On top of the hole were four feet of timbers, bags and concrete. Then and only then did he go and make some coffee. He drank it, cup after cup, and slept.

The dog stayed on the bed at his feet.

When the man woke, the sun was streaming in through the windows. It was a new day. Though the fire had long since died out, the room was warm. Such days in Vermont were called weather breeders. Staples listened. There was no sound except the ticking of his clock. Not realizing what he was doing, he knelt by the bed, thanked God for His mercies, jumped into bed again and slept for another twenty-four hours. This time he awoke and listened. There was no noise. He was sure that by this time the cement had hardened. This morning he stayed wake and shared a Gargantuan meal with the dog. Then it seemed the proper thing to go to the basement. There was no doubt that the machinery was a wreck but the hole was closed. Satisfied that the trouble was over, he took his gun and dog and went hunting.

When he returned, he did not have to enter the mill to know

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that the grinding had begun again. Even before he started down the steps, he recognized too well the vibration and the sound. This time it was a melody of notes, a harmony of discords, and he realized that the thing, which before had cut through solid rock, was now wearing its way through a cement in which were bags, timbers and pieces of iron. Each of these gave a different tone. Together they all wailed over their dissolution.

Staples saw, even with first glance, that it would not be long before his cement "cork" would be destroyed. What was there to do next? All that day when hunting, his mind had been dimly working on that problem. Now he had the answer. He could not cork the hole, so he would fill it with water. The walls of the mill were solid, but he could blast a hole through them and turn the mill race into the cellar. The race, fed by the river, took only a part of what it could take, if its level were rapidly lowered. Whatever it was that was breaking down the floor of the mill could be drowned. If it were alive, it could be killed. If it were fire, it could be quenched. There was no use to wait until the hole was again opened. The best plan was to have everything ready. He went back to his kitchen and cooked a meal of ham and eggs. He ate all he could. He boiled a pot of coffee. Then he started to work. The wall reached three feet down below the surface. A charge of powder, heavy enough to break through, would wreck the whole building, so he began to peck at the wall, like a bird pecking at a nut. First a period of drilling and then a little powder and a muffled explosion. A few buckets of loosened rock. Then some more drilling and another explosion. At last he knew that only a few inches of rock lay between the water and the cellar.

All this time there had been a symphony of noises, a disharmony of sounds. The constant grinding came from the floor, interrupted by the sound of sledge or crowbar, dull explosion of powder, and crashing of rock fragments on the floor. Staples worked without stop save to drink coffee. The dog stood on the upper steps.

Then without warning the whole floor caved in. Staples jumped to the steps. These held. On the first day there had been a hole a few feet wide. Now the opening occupied nearly the entire area of the floor. Staples, nauseated, looked down to the bottom. About twenty feet below him, a mass of rocks and timbers churned in a peculiar way, but all gradually disappeared in a second hole, fifteen feet wide. Even as he looked they all disappeared in this median hole.

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The opening he had been breaking in the wall was directly across from the steps. There was a charge of powder there but no way of going across to light the fuse. Still there was no time to lose and he had to think fast. Running to the floor above he picked up his rifle and went to the bottom of the steps. He was able to throw the beam from his searchlight directly into the hole in the wall. Then he shot—once—twice, and the third time the explosion told him he had succeeded.

The water started to run into the cellar. Not fast at first but more rapidly as the mud and weeds were cleared out. Finally an eight-inch stream flowed steadily into the bottomless hole. Staples sat on the bottom steps. Soon he had the satisfaction of seeing the water fill the larger hole and then cover the floor, what there was left of it. In another hour he had to leave the lower steps. He went out to the mill race and saw that there was still enough water to fill a hundred such holes. A deep sense of satisfaction filled his weary mind.

And again, after eating, he sought sleep.

When he awoke, he heard the rain angrily tapping at the windows with multi-fingers. The dog was on the woven rug by the side of the bed. He was still restless and seemed pleased to have his master awake. Staples dressed more warmly than usual and spent an extra half hour making pancakes to eat with honey. Sausages and coffee helped assuage his hunger. Then with rubber boots and a heavy raincoat, he went out into the valley. The very first thing that he noticed was the mill race. It was practically empty. The little stream of water at the bottom was pouring into the hole he had blasted into the stone wall hours before. The race had contained eight feet of water. Now barely six inches remained, and the dread came to the man that the hole in the cellar was not only emptying the race but was also draining the little river that for thousands of years had flowed through the valley. It had never gone dry. He hastened over to the dam and his worst fears were realized. Instead of a river, there was simply a streak of mud with cakes of dirty ice, all being washed by the torrent of rain. With relief he thought of this rain. Millions of tons of snow would melt and fill the river. Ultimately the hole would fill and the water would rise again in the mill-race. Still he was uneasy. What if the hole had no bottom?

When he looked into the basement he was little reassured. The water was still going down, though slowly. It was rising in the basement, and this meant

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that it was now running in faster than it was running down.

Leaving his coat and boots on the first floor, he ran up the stone steps to the second floor, built a fire in the living room and started to smoke—and think. The machinery of the mill was in ruins; of course it could be fixed, but as there was no more need of it, the best thing was to leave it alone. He had gold saved by his ancestors. He did not know how much, but he could live on it. Restlessly he reviewed the past week, and, unable to rest, hunted for occupation. The idea of the gold stayed in his mind and the final result was that he again put on his boots and coat and carried the entire treasure to a little dry cave in the woods about a half mile from the mill. Then he came back and started to cook his dinner. He went past the cellar door three times without looking down.

Just as he and the dog had finished eating, he heard a noise. It was a different one this time, more like a saw going through wood, but the rhythm was the same—Hrrrrr—Hrrrrr. He started to go to the cellar but this time he took his rifle, and though the dog followed, he howled dismally with his tail between his legs, shivering.

As soon as Staples reached the first floor, he felt the vibration. Not only could he feel the vibration, he could see it. It seemed that the center of the floor was being pushed up. Flashlight in hand, he opened the cellar door. There was no water there now—in fact there was no cellar left! In front of him was a black wall on which the light played in undulating waves. It was a wall and it was moving. He touched it with the end of his rifle. It was hard and yet there was a give to it. Feeling the rock, he could feel it move. Was it alive? Could there be a living rock? He could not see around it but he felt that the bulk of the thing filled the entire cellar and was pressing against the ceiling. That was it! The thing was boring through the first floor. It had destroyed and filled the cellar! It had swallowed the river! Now it was working at the first floor. If this continued, the mill was doomed. Staples knew that it was a thing alive, and *he had to stop it!*

He was thankful that all of the steps in the mill were of stone, fastened and built into the wall. Even though the floor did fall in, he could still go to the upper rooms. He realized that from now on the fight had to be waged from the top floors. Going up the steps, he saw that a small hole had been cut through the oak flooring. Even as he watched, this grew larger. Trying to remain calm, realizing that only by doing so could he retain his san-

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ity, he sat down in a chair and timed the rate of enlargement. But there was no need of using a watch: the hole grew larger—and larger and larger—and now he began to see the dark hole which had sucked the river dry. Now it was three feet in diameter—now four feet—now six. It was working smoothly now—it was not only grinding—*but it was eating*.

Staples began to laugh. He wanted to see what it would do when the big stone grinders slipped silently down into that maw. That would be a rare sight. All well enough to swallow a few pavement stones, but when it came to a twenty-ton grinder, that would be a different kind of a pill. "I hope you choke!" he cried, "Damn you! whatever you are! I hope you choke!" The walls hurled back the echo of his shouts and frightened him into silence. Then the floor began to tilt and the chairs to slide toward the opening. Staples sprang toward the steps.

"Not yet!" he shrieked. "Not today, Elenora! Some other day, but not today!" And then from the safety of the steps, he witnessed the final destruction of the floor and all in it. The stones slipped down, the partitions, the beams, and then, as though satisfied with the work and the food, the Thing dropped down, down, down and left Staples dizzy on the steps looking into a hole, dark, deep, coldly bottomless surrounded by the walls of the mill, and below them a circular hole cut out of the solid rock. On one side a little stream of water, a tiny waterfall, came through the blasted wall and fell below. Staples could not hear it splash at the bottom.

Nauseated and vomiting, he crept up the steps to the second floor, where the howling dog was waiting for him. On the floor he lay, sweating and shivering in dumb misery. It took hours for him to change from a frightened animal to a cerebrating god, but ultimately he accomplished even this, cooked some more food, warmed himself and slept.

And while he dreamed, the dog kept sleepless watch at his feet. He awoke the next morning. It was still raining, and Staples knew that the snow was melting on the hills and soon would change the little valley river into a torrent. He wondered whether it was all a dream, but one look at the dog showed him the reality of the last week. He went to the second floor again and cooked breakfast. After he had eaten, he slowly went down the steps. That is, he started to go, but halted at the sight of the hole. The steps had held and ended on a wide stone platform. From there another flight of steps went down to what had once been the cellar.

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Those two flights of steps clinging to the walls had the solid stone mill on one side, but on the inside they faced a chasm, circular in outline and seemingly bottomless; but the man knew there was a bottom and from that pit the Thing had come—and would come again.

That was the horror of it! He was so certain that it would come again. Unless he was able to stop it. How could he? Could he destroy a Thing that was able to bore a thirty-foot hole through solid rock, swallow a river and digest grinding stones like so many pills? One thing he was sure of —he could accomplish nothing without knowing more about it. To know more, he had to watch. He determined to cut a hole through the floor. Then he could see the Thing when it came up. He cursed himself for his confidence, but he was sure it would come.

It did. He was on the floor looking into the hole he had sawed through the plank, and he saw it come: but first he heard it. It was a sound full of slithering slidings, wrathful rasping of rock against rock—but, no! That could not be, for this Thing Was alive. Could this be rock and move and grind and eat and drink? Then he saw it come into the cellar and finally to the level of the first floor, and then he saw its head and face.

The face looked at the man, and Staples was glad that the hole in the floor was as small as it was. There was a central mouth filling half the space; fully fifteen feet in diameter was that mouth, and the sides were ashen gray and quivering. There were no teeth.

That increased the horror: a mouth without teeth, without any visible means of mastication, and yet Staples shivered as he thought of what had gone into that mouth, down into that mouth, deep into the recesses of that mouth and disappeared. The circular lip seemed made of scales of steel, and they were washed clean with the water from the race.

On either side of the gigantic mouth was an eye, lidless, browless, pitiless. They were slightly withdrawn into the head so the Thing could bore into rock without injuring them. Staples tried to estimate their size: all he could do was to avoid their baleful gaze. Then even as he watched the mouth closed and the head began a semicicular movement, so many degrees to the right, so many degrees to the left and up—and up—and finally the top touched the bottom of the plank Staples was on and then Hrrrrrr—Hrrrrrrr, and the man knew that it was starting upon the destruction of the second floor. He could not see now as he had been able to see before, but

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he had an idea that after grinding a while the Thing opened its mouth and swallowed the debris. He looked around the room. Here was where he did his cooking and washing, and here was his winter supply of stove wood. A thought came to him.

Working frantically, he pushed the center burner to the middle of the room right over the hole he had cut in the floor. Then he built a fire in it, starting it with a liberal supply of coal-oil. He soon had the stove red hot. Opening the door he again filled the stove with oak and then ran for the steps. He was just in time. The floor, cut through, disappeared into the Thing's maw and with it the red-hot stove. Staples yelled in his glee, "A hot pill for you this time, a *hot pill!*"

If the pill did anything, it simply increased the desire of the Thing to destroy, for it kept on till it had bored a hole in this floor equal in size to the holes in the floors below it. Staples saw his food, his furniture, the ancestral relics disappear into the same opening that had consumed the machinery and mill supplies.

On the upper floor the dog howled.

The man slowly went up to the top floor, and joined the dog, who had ceased to howl and had begun a low whine. There was a stove on this floor, but there was no food. That did not make any difference to Staples: for some reason he was not hungry any more: it did not seem to make any difference—nothing seemed to matter or make any difference any more. Still he had his gun and over fifty cartridges, and he knew that at the last, even a Thing like that would react to bullets in its eyeballs—he just knew that nothing could withstand that.

He lit the lamp and paced the floor in a cold, careless mood. One thing he had determined. He said it over and over to himself.

"This is my home. It has been the home of my family for two hundred years. No devil or beast or worm can make me leave it."

He said it again and again. He felt that if he said it often enough, he would believe it, and if he could only believe it, he might make the Worm believe it. He knew now that it was a Worm, just like the night crawlers he had used so often for bait, only much larger. Yes, that was it. A Worm like a night crawler, only much larger, in fact, very much larger. That made him laugh—to think how much larger this Worm was than the ones he had used for fishing. All through the night he walked the floor and burned the lamp and said, "This is my home. No Worm can make me leave it!" Several times he went down the steps, just a few

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of them, and shouted the message into the pit as though he wanted the Worm to hear and understand, "This is my home! *No Worm can make me leave it!*"

Morning came. He mounted the ladder that led to the trap door in the roof and opened it. The rain beat in. Still that might be a place of refuge. Crying, he took his Burton and his Rabelais and wrapped them in his raincoat and put them out on the roof, under a box. He took the small pictures of his father and mother and put them with the books. Then in loving kindness he carried the dog up and wrapped him in a woolen blanket. He sat down and waited, and as he did so he recited poetry—anything that came to him, all mixed up, "Come into the garden where there was a man who was so wondrous wise, he jumped into a bramble bush and you're a better man than I am and no one will work for money and the King of Love my Shepherd is"—and on—and then—

He heard the sliding and the slithering rasping, and he knew that the Worm had come again. He waited till the Hrrrrr—Hrrrrrr told that the wooden floor he was on was being attacked, and then he went up the ladder. It was his idea to wait till the Thing had made a large opening, large enough so the eyes could be seen, and then use the fifty bullets—where they would do the most good. So, on the roof, beside the dog, he waited.

He did not have to wait long. First appeared a little hole and then it grew wider and wider till finally the entire floor and the furniture had dropped into the mouth, and the whole opening, thirty feet wide and more than that, was filled with the head, the closed mouth of which came within a few feet of the roof. By the aid of the light from the trap door, Staples could see the eye on the left side. It made a beautiful bull's eye, a magnificent target for his rifle and he was only a few feet away. He could not miss. Determined to make the most of his last chance to drive his enemy away, he decided to drop down on the creature, walk over to the eye and put the end of the rifle against the eye before he fired. If the first shot worked well, he could retire to the roof and use the other cartridges. He knew that there was some danger—but it was his last hope. After all he knew that when it came to brains he was a man, and this Thing was only a Worm. He walked over the head. Surely no sensation could go through such massive scales. He even jumped up and down. Meantime the eye kept looking up at the roof. It it saw the man, it made no signs, gave no evidence. Staples pretended to pull the trigger and

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then made a running jump for the trap door. It was easy. He did it again, and again. Then he sat on the edge of the door and thought.

He suddenly saw what it all meant. Two hundred years before, his ancestors had started grinding at the mill. For over a hundred and fifty years the mill had been run continuously, often day and night. The vibrations had been transmitted downward through the solid rock. Hundreds of feet below the Worm had heard them and felt them and thought it was another Worm. It had started to bore in the direction of the noise. It had taken two hundred years to do it, but it had finished the task, it had found the place where its mate should be. For two hundred years it had slowly worked its way through the primitive rock. Why should it worry over a mill and the things within it? Staples saw then that the mill had been but a slight incident in its life. It was probable that it had not even known it was there—the water, the gristmill stones, the red-hot stove, had meant nothing—they had been taken as a part of the day's work. There was only one thing that the Worm was really interested in, only one idea that had reached its consciousness and remained there through two centuries, and that was to find its mate. The eye looked upward.

Staples, at the end, lost courage and decided to fire from a sitting position in the trap door. Taking careful aim, he pulled the trigger. Then he looked carefully to see what damage had resulted. There was none. Either the bullet had gone into the eye and the opening had closed or else it had glanced off. He fired again and again.

Then the mouth opened—wide—wider—until there was nothing under Staples save a yawning void of darkness.

The Worm belched a cloud of black, nauseating vapor. The man, enveloped in the cloud, lost consciousness and fell.

The Mouth closed on him.

On the roof the dog howled.

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THE MAN

By FRANK R. PAUL

[*NOTE: Just as science-fiction writers try to speculate about the unknown, so science-fiction artists attempt to draw those speculations, none more brilliantly than the late Frank R. Paul, whose wonderful covers decorated science-fiction magazines for more than a quarter of a century. One of his most typical creations was the splendid Martian reproduced on our front cover. We also offer you the explanatory notes for that cover and think you'll find them an interesting example of what science fiction and its artists thought about the Red Planet and its inhabitants as of 1939.*]

Science tells us that it is logical to believe that other planets are inhabited by some form of life. Just what type isn't exactly certain, but astronomy points toward definite planetary conditions which can be taken into consideration in imagining what type of "man" that planet would be most likely to develop. On our [front] cover we have conceived of the Man from Mars, as he most logically might exist.

Mars, the oldest of planets, cooled faster than its larger brothers. Its location also aided in its rapid advance, and life must have appeared there long before on earth. Therefore, our Martian must be more advanced, more evolved than we. Considering his planetary environment he would most likely possess the following features.

Mars' lesser gravity would give him great stature, would provide the necessity for rather peculiar modes of locomotion. Therefore, we can give him suction feet, rather frail, thin body, and large head. Thin atmosphere would make large ears necessary to catch sound, would give him enormous lung development, and would tend to make him develop telepathy as a more practical method of communication. A very cold climate would clothe him with heavy warm fur, white in color due to the absence of color-producing sunlight. His advanced science would aid him by providing extremely efficient protective clothing as a most necessary factor in his life. He would also possess an evolution permitting protection of delicate eyes and nose against cold through retraction into the body. All in all he would be a highly evolved creature with great science knowledge and high intelligence.

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FROM MARS

KEY TO FRONT COVER ILLUSTRATION

A Erectable natural telepathic antenna for extrasensory communication.

B Enormous shell shaped ears to catch sound waves in Mars' rarefied atmosphere.

C Retractable eyes and nose to protect against freezing in extreme cold.

D Huge lung development, to provide sufficient oxygen for a large body.

E Heavy, closely knit white fur, to protect the frail body against extreme cold.

F Atomic weapon, utilizing advanced atomic science of the power in the atom.

G Synthetic water and food pellets to provide nourishment on the desert.

H Scientifically constructed clothing, impervious to cold, electrically warmed.

I Disc shaped feet, equipped with natural suction cups and valve openings.

J Protective glassite helmet, since Mars' air is too thin for Earthmen.

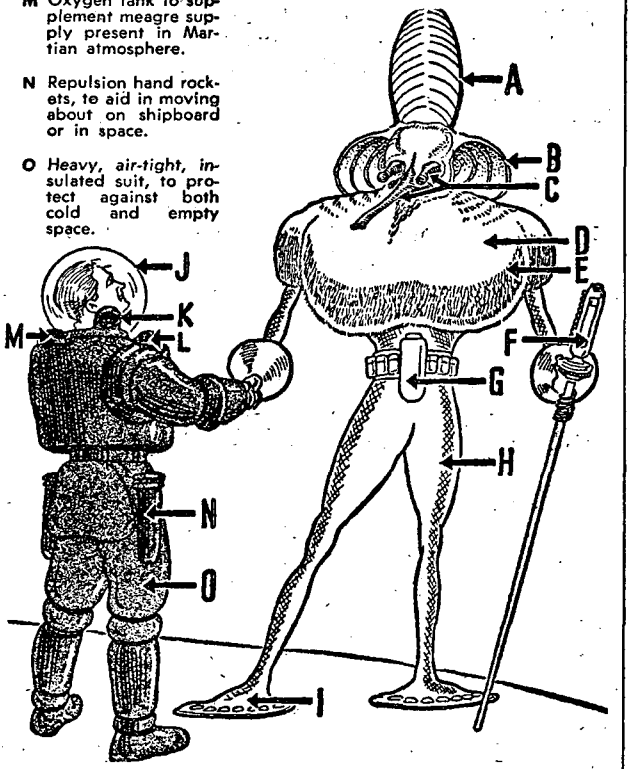
K Amplifiers to pick up sound vibrations in the thin atmosphere inaudible to us.

L Oxygen purifier, to cleanse our air supply, and remove carbon dioxide.

M Oxygen tank to supplement meagre supply present in Martian atmosphere.

N Repulsion hand rockets, to aid in moving about on shipboard or in space.

O Heavy, air-tight, insulated suit, to protect against both cold and empty space.



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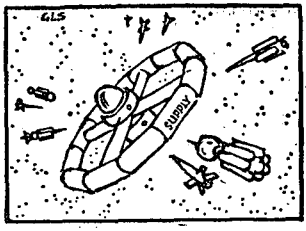

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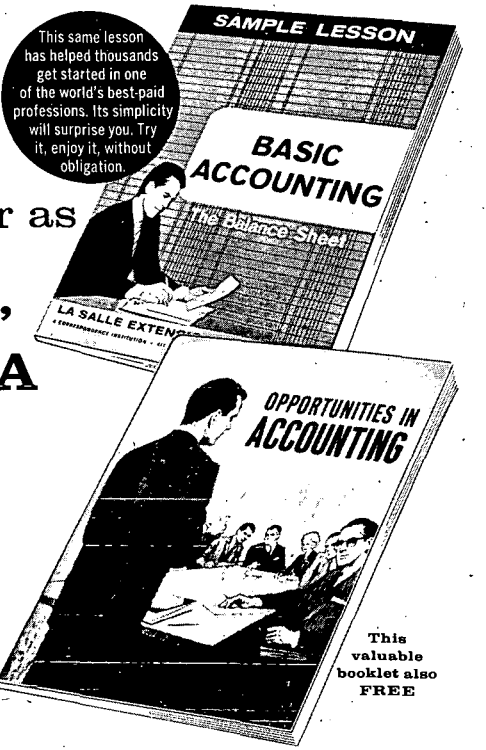
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